OUNG, AND HE WAS OLD.

SHE WAS YOUNG, AND HE WAS OLD.

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SHE WAS YOUNG

AND

HE WAS OLD.

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF 'LOVER AND HUSBAND.'

'Some narrow hearts there are
That suffer blight when that they fed upon,
As something to complete their being, fails;
And they retire into their holds and pine,
And, long restrain'd, grow stern. But some there are
That in a sacred want and hunger rise,
And draw the misery home and live with it,
And, excellent in honour, wait, and will
That somehow good will yet be found in it,
Else wherefore were they born?'

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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SHE WAS YOUNG,

AND HE WAS OLD.

CHAPTER I.

THE CHESNEYS AT HOME.

'He became
Considerably uninviting
To those who, meditation slighting,
Were moulded in a different frame. . . .
And he scorn'd them, and they scorn'd him,
And he scorn'd all they did.' SHELLEY.

THE morning-room at Chesney Court was one of the pleasantest rooms in the house. It looked out on the pretty grounds on the south side; and beyond them, to the left, from its windows one could catch a bright gleam through the trees of the silvery Swirl; and beyond that again of the Claverings, fading gradually away into the blue distance. But notwithstanding

its attractions, the morning-room was not greatly in favour with the heads of the house—Sir Robert, that is to say, and its actual, though not nominal, mistress, Horatia. It was an idle-looking room, in the first place: there were charming low couches, and marvellous 'sleepy hollows' of arm-chairs; nicknacks of all kinds, valuable and trifling; prettily-bound modern books, and a few attractively venerable ones; blue damask and snow-white fleecy rugs; and, best of all, flowers in abundance, whatever the season; but there was no suggestion of business of any kind, and in their own way the brother and sister were very busy people indeed. Nor were they very sociable, except at the stated and orthodox hours when sociability, or at least the semblance of it, is a recognised institution. The brightest side of Sir Robert's moody and taciturn disposition was his love of field-sports and out-door exercise of every kind; thanks to which, his family were relieved of his company some hours out of the twenty-four, and now and then two or three entire days out of the seven. And when in the house, he much preferred his own gloomy little sitting-room, where he could write his business letters, grub over old parchments containing information about some one of the disputes incessantly arising between himself

and his neighbours or his tenants, and clean his guns in peace. It was certainly a somewhat hard dispensation which gave to one small corner of the same county two such landowners as Sir Robert Chesney and Mr. Nugent; for, unlike as they were in everything else, they resembled each other wonderfully in the ingenuity they displayed in the art of making themselves disagreeable. It was 'a toss-up between 'em,' the country-folk used to say; but, on the whole, I fancy the Squire bore off the prize. For no doubt Sir Robert was much more of a man than the testy, hypochondriacal, fidgety, gossiping owner of the Priory, the one glaring inconsistency of whose disagreeable existence was, his being the husband of his large-hearted, happy-natured wife.

With such a woman as Mrs. Nugent beside him, Sir Robert might have been a very different person; but he had not been so fortunate; for sweet-tempered and truly amiable as was Lady Chesney, she had neither the mental strength nor the physical nerve to obtain much influence over such a character as her husband's—narrow-minded, one-ideaed, and self-engrossed, though not originally without material for the making of an estimable member of society. And, unfortunately, the only woman who had any influence

over him used it to confirm his defects and strengthen his prejudices—was, indeed, incapable of doing otherwise, being but what she was, a female edition of Sir Robert himself; somewhat more amiable perhaps, or at least not so surly; less selfish, in that the Chesney devotion in her was a less purely personal matter than in him; but fully as prejudiced, even more contemptibly narrow-minded, and to those sensitive persons acute to discriminate in such matters, more offensively arrogant where she did not feel herself obliged to be civil, more utterly and icily indifferent to all interests outside those of her own 'very little world.' Sir Robert, if he was in a bad humour, would bow to the greatest lady of his acquaintance without troubling himself to clear the scowl off his brow; his sister, woman-like, never forgot herself in such a direction; but then, on the contrary, she could 'cut' a presuming acquaintance whom she chose to ignore, or a former friend whom it suited her to forget, with an ease and *sang-froid* which gruff Sir Robert could never have acquired; she could 'look at people as if they weren't there'—an attainment quite peculiar to the feminine sex.

Horatia had a little den of her own too, not far from her brother's—a convenient arrangement, as

he often employed her as private secretary; besides which, all the household accounts went through her hands, though subject to Sir Robert's critical eye. She had some interests of her own too, though these she never allowed to interfere with the grand duty of acting as her brother's right hand. She was not without philanthropical tendencies, or at least fancied she had them, because looking after schools and the well-being of old women was proper and becoming in a lady of her position. The children's faces did not brighten at the sight of her on the days she drove down to hear them at their lessons; but they bobbed respectfully, so she was conscious of no omission; and whether they thought it or not, her old women assured her there was no tea like that which she periodically brought them, neatly put up in little packets; and Miss Chesney felt satisfied that to them, as to the rest of the world, she performed the 'whole duty of woman' in a perfect and irreproachable manner; above all, to that terrible thorn in her flesh, her little-loved and less-comprehended young step-brother, Maurice Chesney. Poor Horatia! her life was dry and hard, in a sense; but still it suited her, so she should hardly be pitied—unless, indeed, from a much higher point of view, she be pitied all the

more for the ignorance which would not have had things other than they were, which had no conception of the life and beauty outside its own insignificant domain. Whether she had always been thus, or whether possibly, in the far-past days—for she was no longer young—there had come, even to her, glimpses of something warmer and brighter—of music and sunshine and poetry in life—we cannot tell. It may have been so: she was still handsome, and in youth could not have been unattractive; but she was the last woman to talk about herself and her past life; and if she had any little bit of romance in her history to remember, she remembered it probably just in the same way as having had measles or hooping-cough when a little girl.

Owing, therefore, to the peculiarities of Sir Robert and his sister, family life at the Court was not a very sociable affair. There were seasons, of course, in which the house was filled with guests, like other houses of its class; but even the gaiety was done soberly and formally, and in a stated fashion. It was not the sort of place for unexpected guests or impromptu entertainments of any kind: such encroachments would have been utterly at variance with the tastes and habits of its occupants.

The pretty morning-room from which we have wandered had come to be looked upon as a sort of boudoir for the invalid Lady Chesney, on the days she was well enough to leave her room; for, being on the first floor, it was well situated for the convenience of one to whom stairs were a consideration; and its cheerfulness was an additional recommendation. Horatia herself was quite above such weaknesses; *her* rooms were about the ugliest in the house; but a recognised invalid required bright and pleasant things about her—above all, an invalid Lady Chesney—and it was quite true that, as Mrs. Bland had said to Eleanor, the mistress of Chesney Court had 'everything that she could wish for.' She would probably have said so herself, had any one questioned her on the subject; for twenty years' custom goes a long way towards making even chronic ill-health easy; and though the feeling subsisting between the invalid and her sister-in-law hardly amounted to affection, still it was a serviceable enough sort of regard with which to get through the 'intercourse of daily life.' They were used to each other, at least; and it fortunately came as naturally to the one to submit to all being done for her, as to the other to take the lead in arrangements and decisions.

Lady Chesney was alone in her sitting-room one lovely spring morning, eighteen months after our last sight of Chesney; for the time of the family's sojourn on the Continent had passed quickly enough, as Mrs. Bland had sagely prophesied, and they were all now back at the Court again, though not at present with the intention of making a long stay there. Lady Chesney was feeling pleased to be at home again; for she loved Chesney and its associations, sad enough though many of them were. Her health too was really improved by the long course of baths and waters to which she had submitted, and she felt well enough to enjoy the freshness and fragrance of the English spring —an unusually delicious one that year—and to say within herself that, after all, there was nothing more beautiful than the 'kindling green' of our own hedge-rows, the snowy blossoms of our own orchards. She was a tender-natured woman, and more sensitive to certain of the higher, deeper influences than her want of education or power to express her feelings would have led one to suppose. Indeed, she shrank from ever attempting to do so, save now and then, but rarely, when with Maurice alone, some word or expression of his made her forget herself and the commonplace interests about her, in a glance or tone of

responsive sympathy. But this was never the case in the presence of others. Lady Chesney was too timid and diffident ever to have an opinion of her own, even as to the beauty of a flower or a colour, when her remarks were to be overheard by her husband or Horatia; and long ago she had smarted too severely under the accusation of 'encouraging Maurice's desultoriness and frivolity,' ever to allow others to see her instinctive turning to him for sympathy in the feelings she herself but half understood. So it was but very seldom that the barrier of her unconscious reserve was broken; and even Maurice, well as he loved her, little suspected how much there was in his sister-in-law of genuine appreciation of the things and thoughts he valued most.

She was arranging her flowers herself this morning, handling them tenderly and lovingly, when her brother-in-law entered the room.

'Down already, Elizabeth!' he said cheerfully. 'I had no idea of finding you here so early. I only came in to look for a book. I intended to spend the morning in the woods. Dear me, how I wish you could come with me, to see how lovely it is down by the brook! But there's no saying what you won't be able for before long, if you are up and dressed

by twelve o'clock. You really are better, Elizabeth, aren't you?' he said anxiously. 'I have not seen you alone before to ask.'

'Yes, dear Maurice,' she answered gratefully—and the glance with which she looked up at him was very pleasant to see—'I really think I am stronger. Radically better I can never hope to be; but I am sure I am stronger.'

'I am so glad, so very glad of it, mother,' he said. He often called her so when quite alone, though most careful never to let others hear it. 'There will be one pleasant thought to get through the year with, if you keep really better. You are the only person I care for in all the world, Elizabeth—at least, you most certainly are the only person that cares for me.'

Lady Chesney had finished arranging her flowers by this time, and seated herself on the low chair she always occupied. It was placed so as to command a view of all the beauty to be seen from the window; and as her eye glanced for a moment at the lovely landscape, a slight expression of bewilderment succeeded the look of pain Maurice's last words had called forth. He knelt down beside her, and looked up in her face.

'Don't look so shocked, mother,' he said boyishly. 'You know it's quite true, and it's a relief to say it out sometimes. Why do you look so grave about it? It's nothing new.'

'I don't know why it vexes me more than usual for you to speak so,' she answered slowly. 'I suppose it was just the feeling of coming home and everything looking so beautiful. It seems such a pity we cannot all be happy too. Sometimes I fear I have made things worse, Maurice, all these years by letting you speak so to me. Robert and Horatia and you might have drawn more together, if I had not been in the way. When I think that, Maurice, I wish I had died twenty-two years ago, when my little baby died. And the only thing that kept me alive then was the hope of being of some good to you.'

Maurice's face softened, and he looked self-reproachful.

'Dear Elizabeth,' he said affectionately, 'you know you *have* been of good to me—every good. But for you, I should certainly have gone to the bad somehow. You know all that; and you know there never can be any cordiality between Robert and Horatia and me. It isn't to be expected there should be. But no one can be more anxious than I am to keep

on good terms; and this morning I have been driven nearly wild by the way Robert has been going on at me about my last offence; and Horatia, of course, must add her nasty little sneers. It's a shame of me to bother you about it; but, really, both of them on me at once, seems more than I can stand sometimes.'

'You mean about your selling out, I suppose?' inquired Lady Chesney. 'I was in hopes Robert had begun to get over it a little.'

'Was he very violent about it at first, when I wrote to tell of having done it?' asked Maurice.

'He was angry, of course,' replied his sister-in-law; 'but I think he expected it. I did not know what was the matter for a day or two, till Horatia told me. I think she was almost more put out about it than Robert.' ('Ah, then, she's been working him up,' interrupted Maurice.) 'She could not believe you would actually do it. She thinks so much of the position and prestige of being in the Guards, and people talk so about the evil of a young man's having no occupation, you know.'

'But that wasn't occupation, Elizabeth,' exclaimed her brother-in-law—'not, at least, what I call occupation. The stupidest routine work that

any fool could learn, and the rest of the time idling about town doing nothing, or worse. O, I hated it so; and in seven years I had time to judge. What was the good of sending me to college, in preparation for such a life as that? I always told Robert I had no taste for soldiering; but if he had put me into a good, honest, hard-working, marching regiment, I believe I should not have done badly, though I would just about as soon have been a good, honest, hard-working carpenter.'

'But a line regiment would have been out of place for a young man of your position and expectations, Maurice,' said Lady Chesney timidly. 'You know you stand in the place of an eldest son; and most young men are wild to get into the Guards.'

'I know they are,' replied Maurice; 'but then, you see, I am not like most young men. I have always been wickedly ungrateful for my advantages, as Horatia tells me. I don't mean to disparage other people: there are several men in my old regiment I respected and liked, and they liked their work and did it well. But then I disliked it, and everything about it; and from the first I warned Robert it would not suit me. I felt myself out of my element the whole time, and naturally I was not liked except by

two or three. There was a perpetual irritation going on—and O, Elizabeth, I do so hate town!'

Lady Chesney sighed.

'It is very unfortunate,' she said.

'I know it is,' said Maurice. 'It's unfortunate for me, and unfortunate for those who have to do with me. I really do feel sorry for Robert sometimes, Elizabeth; for though it is utterly out of my power to avoid it, I am quite conscious what an incessant irritation I am to him. The truth is, I have been a mistake from the beginning. My existing at all is a mistake. Nobody wanted me before I came; and now I am here, everybody would be better without me.'

He spoke half laughingly, but with an undertone of real bitterness. Lady Chesney's eyes filled with tears.

'Maurice!' she said reproachfully.

'O, I am a brute,' he exclaimed, 'vexing you again, the second time in half an hour. But I am all rubbed the wrong way this morning. I wish I had gone straight out into the woods without coming to tease you; I shall feel good again after I have been alone with the brook and the birds for a few hours. What a blessing it is to have them to go to!

I declare, Elizabeth, I should die if I had to live all the year round in town. I trust I have done with it for this year, at all events.'

'Then you do not intend going up with us again when we return in a fortnight from now?' asked Lady Chesney, looking rather surprised and a little anxious.

'O dear, no,' he replied. 'You see, I have been there constantly the last four months—ever since I left you at Vichy in the autumn. I have not had a breath of fresh air this year. I was only gazetted out a fortnight ago; and I did not like to behave shabbily at the end by asking for leave when I did not really need it, though I could have got it. I can stay here, I suppose, in my own rooms, can't I? There can be no objection to that.'

'O no, no objection in that way,' answered Lady Chesney hesitatingly. 'But, Maurice—' She stopped.

'But what, my dear Elizabeth?' turning back on his way to leave the room.

'I thought—I understood—do not be vexed with me, Maurice, but I understood from Horatia that when we returned home you were to—I mean the question of your marriage was to be taken into consideration. She told me it was only Miss Berners

being so very young that prevented its being all settled two years ago. And now this is her third season beginning, and you are twenty-six past, Maurice, so I supposed it was all going to be smooth and satisfactory. And I never doubted but what you would be going to town with us—the Berners are already there—so that you might see more of each other. I do hope there will be no disappointment about this, dear Maurice. I am sure Robert and Horatia are counting on it as a certainty. And it has been so much talked of—your name and Amethyst Berners' so constantly mentioned together. Everybody says that, but for some understanding on the subject, she would have made some grand marriage last year.'

'I only wish she had,' exclaimed Mr. Chesney, a cloud of deep annoyance overspreading his face, so pleasant but a moment before. 'Not that I care for what everybody says, or, for the matter of that, what Sir Robert and his sister expect, on such a subject. I tell you, Elizabeth, *I* am perfectly uncompromised; and if people are so silly as to say anything else, I can't help it. I have never in the slightest degree given Miss Berners or any of her friends to suppose she was anything more to me than any other girl.'

Lady Chesney looked surprised and alarmed.

'But, Maurice,' she said, 'there must have been something said about it, or else there is some strange mistake. Only yesterday Horatia was speaking of it as of a thing that was sure to be. Something has been said about it to Miss Berners' parents, if not to herself; for Horatia was alluding to their liking the idea of it, from their wish to keep their daughter near them, and their old friendship for your family.'

'It is quite possible Robert and Horatia have an understanding with the Berners on the subject,' replied Maurice coolly; 'but I do not see that that has anything to say to me. Fully two years ago Horatia began hinting about it to me one day, and I told her I would have nothing to say to any arrangement of the kind. I had nothing to say against Miss Berners; for I knew next to nothing of her, nor do I now. But the idea of these schemes and plans sickens and revolts me. It would make me hate the girl if she was an angel.'

'Ah, that is so like you, Maurice!' sighed Lady Chesney. 'I am afraid it is true you are dreadfully impracticable; but at least you need not make up your mind in this matter till you have some ground to go upon. How can you tell what you will think

of Miss Berners till you have seen more of her? Indeed, I do not know that you have seen her at all, since she came out.'

'Yes, I have,' said Maurice gloomily.

'And did you not admire her?' asked his sister-in-law eagerly, with some natural female curiosity.

'Of course I could see she was pretty—frightfully pretty,' allowed Mr. Chesney; 'but'—and here he broke off rather abruptly—'I suppose,' he went on, after a moment's pause, 'every man, however great a fool he is, may have an ideal woman in his imagination, whether he ever meets with her or not; and this, Elizabeth, Amethyst Berners could never be to me. I don't suppose any one ever will be—I'm not one of the lucky ones of earth, and I don't say but what the chances are I may marry Miss Berners after all. It's just the sort of thing I shall drift into as likely as not, for peace' sake, if the pressure is judiciously brought to bear. Just the way I gave in seven years ago about going into the army.'

Lady Chesney, to confess the truth, felt considerably relieved. So strong on her was the habit of subjection, that by it her higher impulses were constantly overridden. Nothing seemed to her so terrible as possible opposition to her husband or Ho-

ratia. Far better that Maurice should marry with but half a heart, or no heart at all, than risk their displeasure. Not that she would have put this creed of hers deliberately into so many plain words; but she lived so completely under its influence, that it naturally ruled her every thought and idea. But there was something in her brother-in-law's tone that startled and shocked her, notwithstanding her relief at the first appearance of the flag of truce; so she said nothing, not knowing exactly what to say. Maurice was the first again to break silence.

'There is one thing strikes me as having been overlooked in this very charming little arrangement,' he said suddenly; 'a mere trifle, of course, hardly worth naming in connection with a beauty who has had three London seasons—whose heart, I should say, must be a very "well-known work of art" by this time, if ever it was anything else; I mean, what would come of it all if Miss Berners chose to say No? *My* lacerated feelings, of course, are not to be taken into consideration; but imagine the effect on Robert and Horatia of *their* brother being rejected! Really, my dear Elizabeth, it is very terrible to think of, and, upon my word, it gives a new flavour to the affair. You see, what you said just now about Miss

Berners' name being coupled with mine by the admiring public makes us realise our awful position. It isn't as if we had to do with "common people," you see; it's a "Norman blood" and "coronets" concern. Truly, it is to be hoped Miss Chesney knows what she is about.'

His satire was lost upon his companion.

'I don't understand what you are talking about, Maurice,' she said simply. 'As to "Norman blood," you know very well the Berners are nothing so *very* particular in descent. Let me see. It was only his grandfather, you know, who was just a simple yeoman, and made a fortune by—'

'Forgive my interrupting you, Elizabeth,' said Mr. Chesney. 'I really don't care a farthing about that part of it. On the whole, I should have been much more likely to fall in love with Miss Berners if her people had remained simple yeomen, or simple anything, so that there might have been some chance of her inheriting a little of the family simplicity. As it is, I shall certainly never *fall in love* with her—that is to say, if falling in love, or love itself, is anything like what I am still silly enough to fancy it.

"Love that greatens and glorifies
Till God's aglow, to the loving eyes,
In what was mere earth before,"'

he murmured to himself; but no ear caught the words. 'But for all that, as I said, it is perfectly possible I may marry her some day; or, at least, ask her to marry me. You didn't answer my question, Elizabeth. How can you guarantee that she won't say No?'

'You interrupted me, Maurice, just when I was going to answer it,' said Lady Chesney, with a slight tone of annoyance. '*I* can guarantee nothing about it; but Horatia may be trusted to have felt her way, so intimate as she is with the Berners. And why, but for this understanding, would Miss Berners be still unmarried?'

'I can't say, I'm sure,' replied Maurice carelessly. 'But if she ends her days as Miss Berners, it won't be on my conscience, I know. *I* have nothing to do with the "understanding;" though Horatia is quite clever enough to have set such a report afloat, and Mrs. Berners quite silly enough to have allowed it. And the young lady, I strongly suspect, from what I saw of her last year in London, found it rather convenient than otherwise. She is in no great hurry to get married, I daresay. There are no agonies on the score of a suitable establishment in her case; and so far she can afford to be disinterested, and play

with her victims without calculating which is likely to prove the fattest.'

'You do say such strange things, Maurice,' said Lady Chesney in increased perplexity. 'It does not matter with *me*, of course; but you get into the habit of it; and then you say things that irritate Robert and Horatia. But never mind about that now. Just say you will go up with us to town, and it will be all right. Horatia will understand that you are willing to be reasonable, without any more being said.'

'But I am *not* willing to be reasonable in the way you mean,' exclaimed Maurice, 'flying out' as much as ever he allowed himself to do to one so meek and gentle as Elizabeth. 'Horatia must understand nothing of the kind. If I am not left a *perfectly* free agent in the matter, Elizabeth, I will make a vow that, whoever I do marry, it shall not be Miss Berners. All I do say is, that if I can bring myself to marry in this sort of way—the only way, I fear, likely to be ever possible for me—I will do what I can to please my family in my choice. If I am to sell myself, I certainly shall expect something in return; and family peace is a blessing in its way. But there is one thing you had better tell Horatia, Elizabeth; and that is, if she does not want this pet

scheme of hers to come to grief very speedily, she had better *not* encourage my seeing much of her favourite in town.'

'But why? Have you not seen her there already? Were they not cordial to you, or anything of that kind?' asked Lady Chesney.

Maurice answered all her questions in one.

'I have very rarely met the Berners in town,' he said. 'You know I don't go out much in the very gay society they affect; and the last two years I was abroad with you a good part of the season. But I did meet Miss Berners once or twice; and it did not increase my admiration, or whatever you like to call it. She was very civil; so was her mother. I daresay she would have had no objection to play me off a little against some of her victims; but I did not appreciate the honour. She is the sort of girl whose very worst points come out in such an atmosphere. If I have to marry one of her class, I must make the best of it, and not expect too much; but I don't see the good of seeing with my own eyes what would certainly disgust and revolt me. So I shall trust to you, dear Elizabeth, to get me off any bother about going up to town again just now. I would rather have it settled this way; and I think you can

manage it; for I want to avoid discussion with Robert and Horatia while the selling-out offence is still sore.'

Lady Chesney sighed again.

'You are very severe, Maurice,' she said, but by her tone he knew that she would intercede as he had asked; 'very severe and difficult to please. I don't suppose Amethyst is more frivolous or foolish than most girls of her age and position.'

'I don't suppose she is,' replied Maurice cynically; 'but that's cold comfort. Provided she is not utterly selfish and heartless, as well as frivolous and foolish, I should think her a rare exception. But seriously, Elizabeth, I can't understand *your* being so anxious about this scheme of Horatia's. I can understand Robert and Horatia; but you are different. What do you see so very attractive about this girl?'

'She is so very pretty,' said Lady Chesney.

'I know she is; and I wish she weren't,' ejaculated Maurice.

'Wish she weren't?' repeated his sister-in-law in amazement. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean that if she were less bewitchingly pretty, I should have a better chance. I should be able to

do the thing deliberately, and see the worst of it from the beginning. As it is,' and here his face flushed a little—'as it is, I'm only human, Elizabeth, and I'm quite as likely to be made a fool of as other men, clearly as I may see it all beforehand. If what I used to fancy might be is not to be for me—if there is no such thing nowadays, perhaps, as my ideal of love and marriage—I would rather have the poor sham I must put up with in its real ugliness. I should respect myself more in such a case. It is unspeakably humiliating to me to feel that, knowing all I do of such a girl, rating her no higher than she deserves, I may yet *for a time*—my lower self, that is—stoop to be a slave to the mere physical charms, that in my soul I *cannot* call beauty. And when the spell is over? No; I would much rather she were ugly. Do you understand me, Elizabeth?'

'A little, dear Maurice, I think,' she replied tenderly, and rather sadly. 'But you know, my dear boy, you *are* very high-flown and unlike other people.'

He did not contradict her; he hardly seemed to hear her; and she went on:

'And then her beauty is not her only attraction, Maurice. You don't think me very worldly, I hope;

but I confess I *should* like to see my boy—for you are my boy, Maurice—in such a position as your marriage with Miss Berners would give you. You would be so independent. No more painful coming into collision with Robert and Horatia. And you would be so near us too; for, you know, Amethyst is to have Blendon as soon as she marries. It does seem as if it would smooth everything. And I might live to see *your* children about me, Maurice;' and with the last words the tears stole softly into her eyes, and the tenderness of expression which gave her worn face its nearest approach to beauty crept over it.

'Ah, I see. Poor mother!' whispered the young man very gently, as he stooped to kiss her soft shrunken cheek. 'But I must go now, or I sha'n't escape luncheon, which would not suit me at all to-day. I declare it's past one; I've kept you talking for an hour, Elizabeth. I hope I haven't tired you out. Tell them I am off for a day's ramble. I shall take some luncheon in my pocket.' And thus saying, he left the room.

Never had Maurice's dear old woods been more freshly beautiful than on this lovely spring day; but somehow the innocent beauty failed in its usual

soothing influence. He felt angry with the brook for its rippling murmur, with the birds for their sweet twitter, with the primroses, even, for their soft radiance. They jarred on him in his present irritated, dissatisfied state of mind, and the consciousness of the unwonted discord irritated him still more. He lay down at full length on the short grass, and tried to think out what was the matter with him. Was it all true, perhaps, he asked himself, what, in their different ways, every one about him was always endeavouring to impress on him—that he was a visionary, unpractical dreamer; that it was all nonsense erecting ideals of woman, or goodness, or anything; that the world, though no worse now than it had ever been, was not the sort of place for anything but looking after one's own interests, and taking the best that came in one's way? For he was more of a boy still than he would have liked to own to being, weighted with the dignity of his twenty-six years, and their vast experience of human nature; and even poor Elizabeth's gentle little accusation of 'high-flownness' had mortified him slightly, and left him with a vaguely uncomfortable feeling, that he had been making a fool of himself by talking great nonsense. And yet—and yet—*could* he ever bring him-

self to look on things with the eyes of Robert or Horatia, or any other among those who sneered at his absurd notions; could he marry Amethyst Berners contentedly, and congratulate himself on his good-luck, as half the young men of his acquaintance would be only too happy to do, without inquiring too particularly into the amount of affection the young lady felt for him, as compared with that which she felt for herself and her luxurious belongings; *could* he, once for all, discard all the aspirations, the beliefs, the ideals, in which for so many solitary years he had found his only life worthy of the name, but which had made real life a sadly perplexing and uncongenial affair? Was goodness little more than a name, beauty a mere impression of the senses, truth a delusion? Or, whether they were so or not, would he, Maurice Chesney, do well to act for the future as if he thought so—if he could not tell falsehoods to himself, at least he might give up the vain and wearying struggle to reconcile such hopeless antagonism as that between his own intuitions and the circumstances in which, by no fault of his own, he was placed? Why should he not drift with the tide, and enjoy what came in his way, without all this puzzling himself about the higher realities which

perhaps were not realities at all, only dreams and fancies, the result of his morbid imagination preying upon itself?—just like his ill-luck, to have been born with such a temperament, a stupid, hypochondriacal, questioning, dissatisfied brain, good for nothing but tormenting every one in its neighbourhood, its owner included. And having arrived at this very satisfactory conclusion, Mr. Chesney's philosophy, at no time remarkably profound or original, got very tired of its own introspective researches, and came abruptly to a halt; and by way of refreshing his exhausted powers, he began picking up pebbles, little bits of stick, anything that came handy without his having to move from his comfortable position, with which for about a quarter of an hour he tried vainly to hit a particular twig of a particular bush some little way down the brook on the other side. Then suddenly he gave up this exciting amusement, feeling rather ashamed of its idle mischief; for his chance shots had caused the two bright beady eyes of a water rat to disappear in a fright, had set up a great fluster and scurrying among the feathered inhabitants of the bush itself, and had bruised and soiled more than one of the tender blossoms of a nest of primroses hard by. Maurice got up slowly, and sat down again

on a tree-stump a little lower down the brook, just opposite the bush. 'It's always easy to do mischief,' he remarked to himself, as he drew out his sketch-book and little old tin water-colour box; for he was a dabbler in tints as in many other things, and the primrose clump, and a rich variety of greens and browns round about it, had caught his eye. 'It's always easy to do mischief,' he repeated; 'always easy to do what one shouldn't, and uncommonly hard to do what one should.'

And with the very trite reflection, others stole into his mind. Was he, after all, worse off than other people? Must there not always be a struggle? Why should he give in and talk weakly of drifting with the tide, as if he was an exception to the rest of mankind in finding it difficult to do right? Was it not always difficult?—in as many ways and degrees as the right itself differs, according to the countless temperaments, and natures, and endless combinations of circumstances through which it has to struggle its way, too often all but stifled into silence, or distorted almost beyond recognition.

Maurice thought it over in his own fashion as he went on with his sketch; and whether it was the reflection or the occupation, certain it is, he grew more

cheerful as he worked. He forgot all about Amethyst Berners before long, and the 'to be or not to be' of his fate in connection with hers; forgot all about London and its grandeur and glare; forgot Robert's surliness and Horatia's sneers, and remembered only that here he was, free again, in his dear old woods, whose sights and sounds, familiar to him since earliest boyhood, had had a good deal to do with making the best part of him what it was, and had not yet lost the healthy influence which, so far at least, had been stronger than the plausible, shallow cynicism he now and then felt all but driven to take refuge in. The sketch was a success of its simple kind, and Maurice felt pleased that several months' neglect of his pencil had not more injuriously affected his skill.

'I believe I might come to do something worth looking at of this kind, if I set to work hard at it,' he said to himself with a little temporary self-confidence, as he glanced at his finished sketch; 'but no, I fear I could never get beyond the "pretty" stage. It's just the same in this direction as in every other. My rubbishy verses do well enough in magazines; I have enough music and voice to take a part in a glee; I can do a bit of most things, if I try. Why

wasn't it all tied up together in one bundle? I am just a tangle of beginnings, a lot of loose threads, fastened together at one end and waving away in the air in charming uselessness at the other. If only I had been a carpenter and had had to work, I might have got on. I should probably have gone to schools of design in the evenings, and learned to carve all manner of wonderful things, or design grand pieces of furniture. That would have been better than nothing. I should have been a most steady young man, and might have had a chance then of a wife to my mind, who had never heard of London or diamonds.'

The last reflection brought a slight cloud over his face again; but he dismissed it for the time, and felt pretty cheerful as he sauntered slowly home through the trees, remembering that for some months to come he might safely count on being his own master, and spending his days in as desultory and Bohemian a fashion as he chose.

CHAPTER II.

THE FEATHERS PEW.

'Gray-eyed she was and simple, with eyes bent
Down on the floor; parted her red lips were,
And o'er her sweet face, marvellously fair,
Oft would the colour spread full suddenly:
Clad in a dainty gown, and thin was she.'

Ogier the Dane.

'Some to church repair,
Not for the doctrine, but the music there.'

Essay on Criticism.

'ARE you going to church this morning, Maurice?' asked Miss Chesney, as she sat at the head of the breakfast-table, pouring out tea and coffee for her brothers, the first Sunday of their return home.

'No; at least, I think not,' replied the young man.

Horatia said nothing, but looked as if she thought it of a piece with the other enormities of which her step-brother was habitually guilty.

'Going to church'—at Chesney, that is to say,

in particular—was one of Maurice's minor troubles. His religious opinions, as Mrs. Nugent had expressed it, were 'peculiar;' and so far they were in rather a young stage of peculiarity. He had not yet attained to that comfortable table-land of unorthodoxy whence one views with philosophic toleration the countless human expressions of striving after 'that complex, fragmentary, doubt-provoking knowledge which we call truth.' Not that he was *quite* so youthful as to be himself addicted to anything so insane and hopeless as argument on such subjects; but he had not yet learnt to bear with perfect equanimity and genuine absence of irritation the well-meaning, blundering attempts of others to bring the rest of the world round to their own pet way of thinking. He never outwardly lost his temper, or exhibited any visible signs of impatience. His *laissez-aller* bearing often misled those who knew him best, and who would have been not a little astonished had they been suddenly enabled to discern the storm of irritation raging beneath the calm, the unconquerable impatience of stupidity and one-sidedness hidden by the often boyishly trifling manner.

Good Mr. Bland—for good the man was, despite his little 'parsonisms,' his theoretical intoler-

ance, and not unprecedented veneration for his patron simply as such—was a great trial of his kind to poor Maurice. Though in private life a most inoffensive and good-natured individual, rather too ready to yield in household details to the superior intelligence and *savoir faire* of his better half, he no sooner entered his own peculiar domain than a curious reaction took place: with his surplice he donned a startling amount of clerical bumptiousness. When he entered the pulpit (for they were still distressingly 'low' at Chesney) he assumed an air of theological championship that could not but remind one of very different scenes. He was not, as might be inferred, a man of much breeding, and had therefore no habit of surface courtesy to temper the exuberance of his zeal; but neither was he by nature coarse or overbearing, and 'out of the pulpit,' as the Scotch say, his amiability and gentleness went far towards covering the little sins of outward bearing that in most societies are judged with disproportionate severity. It was only on Sundays he succeeded in making himself so very disagreeable—to Mr. Chesney, that is to say; for Sir Robert and Horatia, on such occasions as they listened to the sermon, saw nothing therein to object to. 'Uneducated people require

plain speaking,' said Miss Chesney. And as Mr. Bland never erred on the side of want of deference to herself, she rather liked his vehemence than otherwise, as a proof of the irreproachable way in which the souls as well as the bodies of the privileged tenants of Chesney were looked after by their pastors and masters, spiritual and temporal.

But no such consolation soothed the irritated nerves of poor Maurice on such Sundays as he was weak enough, in deference to the family prejudices, to submit to making one of the party assembled in the great square deep dungeon of a pew, where the energy of Mr. Bland's declamations, and the awful severity of Horatia's eyes, effectually prevented the possibility of his taking refuge in such a breach of decorum as going to sleep.

'If the fellow were only telling us that two and two make four, I'd be inclined to contradict him,' muttered Maurice many a time in the excess of his discomfort. No wonder, truly, that being what he was, he was glad to escape going to church at Chesney, and looked upon it as one of the drawbacks to the delights of his country life. He hated the whole affair. He was just at the age and stage to hate and condemn *in toto*, instead of tolerating, what he did

not like, and could not alter for the better. He detested Mr. Bland's sermons to such an extent, that on Sundays he could hardly bring himself to shake the poor man's limp hand. He hated what he somewhat irreverently called 'the humbug' of it all—the prayers addressed to a universal Father by children who so strangely forgot their brotherhood; he hated most of all the perhaps unavoidable precedence, but unnecessary exclusiveness, of 'the family' on the occasion of the celebration of the most tender and solemn of the Church's Christian rites. As a boy his face had flushed crimson while he obstinately held back from making one of the select quartet that but half filled the allotted space; nor could all Horatia's frowns induce him to approach the altar rails till he did so in company with the clerk and the lamest of the infirm old hobblers from the benches near the door. And now as a man—though he had learnt that such injudicious protestation was more likely to do harm than not, to strike others but as an affectation of humility—his feelings, his principles, his every best impulse, were outraged and jarred each Sunday that his step-sister succeeded in making him act up to her idea of his duty to himself and to other people.

There was a short silence at the breakfast-table after Maurice's unpromising rejoinder. Sir Robert did not appear to have noticed the question, or its answer. He was occupied in sorting the letters he had just taken out of the bag, which little ceremony was an invariable accompaniment of the first meal of the day. He tossed one over to her brother. It was addressed to 'Captain Chesney.'

'You had better tell your correspondents to direct to you properly in future,' he said roughly. 'I'm not one of those that think any fool may call himself captain or major for the rest of his life, whether he sticks to his profession or not, or has done anything to earn his spurs.'

'I quite agree with you,' replied Maurice coolly. 'I am only too glad to drop the "captain," which, I fancy you may remember, I was never very eager to accept. Perhaps, Robert, you will do me the justice also to recollect that my objection to the Guards was just this—that it is very seldom one has an opportunity in that kind of soldiering of earning one's spurs.'

Sir Robert grunted, but said no more. But hardly were the words uttered than Maurice regretted them. He had been quite sincere in what he had said to

Lady Chesney the day before, about really feeling for the disappointment and mortification his selling-out had caused his brother and Horatia; and here he was, at the very first breath of disagreeable allusion, adding to the still fresh irritation by haughty self-defence and inferred recrimination. Then, too, he was opposing their wishes by refusing to accompany them to town. He began to feel rather ashamed of himself, and to seek about for some little means of conciliation. It was ready to his hand.

'I don't know but what I shall go to church this morning, after all,' he began. 'How do you intend to go, Horatia?'

Miss Chesney responded more graciously than might have been expected. The truth was, some part of the *tête-à-tête* of the preceding afternoon had been repeated by Elizabeth to her sister-in-law, who had the sense to see that at present, at least—and if, as Maurice had said, she did not wish her pet scheme to be irrevocably nipped in the bud—her best policy was the nearest approach to amiability she could succeed in assuming.

'I am going to walk,' she replied; 'it is not fine enough for Elizabeth to go, except in a close carriage, which gives her a headache; so I shall tell her

she had better not think of it, and I shall walk by the path. If you decide to go, Maurice, you will find me ready at half-past ten, for I like to walk slowly. I suppose you will come a little later, Robert?'

'Yes; I have letters to write first,' he replied.

'I don't think it is going to rain,' said Maurice, as he rose from his seat and strolled lazily to the window. 'Don't you think, Horatia,' he continued, not much relishing the idea of the walk alone with her—'don't you think Elizabeth might go in her chair, by the path? I really don't see the least sign of rain, and she would enjoy going. I would like to push the chair myself.'

'I cannot think why you should wish to do anything so absurd,' answered Miss Chesney snappishly. 'It is very strange what an incurable love you have for doing other people's work instead of your own. But there is no question of Elizabeth's going on such an unsettled day.'

Mr. Chesney made no reply, but still stood at the window, gazing out dreamily at the lovely freshness of the spring morning, its brilliance tempered by occasional quick-passing sweeps of shadow, which to some extent justified Horatia's reluctance to trust 'the uncertain glory of an April day.'

Miss Chesney grew impatient.

'You sent in your cup for some more coffee, Maurice,' she said; 'if you intend to drink it before it is cold, you had better come back to the table.'

'I beg your pardon for leaving it, Horatia,' he replied gently; 'the first few days of country sights, after being in town so long, make a perfect baby of me;' and he reseated himself in his place.

'We shall see the new tenants at church to-day, I suppose,' remarked Miss Chesney, having recovered her equilibrium, and apparently anxious to make herself agreeable by setting the conversational ball a-rolling.

Sir Robert looked up.

'New tenants!' he exclaimed; 'what new tenants? I know of none.'

'Why, the people who have taken The Feathers,' replied his sister.

'O, those people,' he said indifferently, resuming the perusal of his letters; 'yes, I suppose they go to church.'

Something in the tone irritated Maurice, in the disproportionate, unreasonable way very insignificant trifles sometimes affected his impressionable nature.

'I liked what I saw of Mr. Marshall exceedingly,'

he said warmly, in his quixotic fashion; 'he seemed to me a remarkably straightforward, genuine sort of a man.'

'Indeed!' observed Sir Robert drily, without raising his eyes from his papers; 'he is very fortunate to have won so high an opinion in such a quarter; I was not aware I had let my house to any one who had the honour of your acquaintance.'

Maurice bit his lip and fidgeted, but said nothing. It was not that these small darts of ill-temper annoyed him in themselves; but they showed only too plainly in what quarter the wind blew, and was likely to blow, till his last terrible offence had been forgotten, or to some extent condoned. The prospect of home life for some time to come was not inviting. What a blessing they were going to town in a fortnight! The remembrance strengthened him to make no reply; but the dead silence that followed Sir Robert's sneering observations was not pleasant. To Mr. Chesney's surprise, his step-sister came to the rescue.

'When did you meet Mr. Marshall, Maurice?' she asked, in a matter-of-fact tone. 'I was not aware you knew him. I am glad to hear he is so superior a person.'

Maurice turned towards her quickly, with a grateful expression in his dark eyes which touched even her; and the thought flashed instinctively across her mind, 'He is really handsome at times; what an unspeakable pity he will not make the most of his advantages!'

It was quite true. There were times at which Maurice Chesney's face was more than handsome—'beautiful,' I should be tempted to call it, but for the fear that the much-abused word might convey an impression incompatible with the essential ideas of masculine 'well-favouredness.' These were rare times, however. As a rule, he certainly did not 'make the most of his advantages,' so far as looks were concerned. Had he known the power of expression in his eyes, for instance, he might not have thought it impossible by their means to teach even an Amethyst Berners to care for him, in a sense, for his own sake; independently, that is to say, of his surroundings and 'expectations,' though independently also of the 'soul,' of which 'the body form doth take.' But he was the last man in the world to think of his eyes—fortunately, perhaps; for the species of love a man may evoke by making the most of his good looks would not long have satisfied the

thirst of a nature instinctively seeking for a fulness of sympathy such as falls to the lot of few human beings to appropriate as their own.

So it came about that it seldom occurred to any one that Maurice Chesney—dreamy, unobtrusive, and, for all his quick perception and impressionability, far too genuinely indifferent to public opinion ever to achieve any social success—was more than moderately prepossessing in appearance; and most assuredly the few who came to know him well, and love him as he could be loved, gave no great thought to the regularity of his features or the colour of his eyes.

'I can hardly say that I do know Mr. Marshall,' was his answer to Horatia. 'I only met him once: that was at Lady Carthew's marriage; but I liked him. There was something rather quaint about him; but so thoroughly genuine and straightforward—not in the least like the conventional country attorney.'

'O, yes, by the bye, he is a lawyer,' replied Miss Chesney. 'He was at the Nugents' professionally, of course; seeing after the settlements, no doubt.'

'He *was* there professionally, I think,' said Maurice; 'but I fancy he was invited to the marriage as a friend also. Mrs. Nugent introduced him to me as "an old friend," I remember.'

'Mrs. Nugent says and does very odd things,' observed Horatia, curling her lip.

'Does she?' said Maurice carelessly. 'I wish a few more people would say and do odd things, then. It strikes me the only objectionably odd thing she ever did was marrying that husband of hers. How could she ever have done it! It is strange none of her daughters in the least come up to what she must have been as a girl. They are good sort of girls, without an idea among them; whereas she must have been—'

'What?' asked Horatia sharply, after a little pause. Mrs. Nugent's praises were not a very congenial subject, as Maurice might have remembered, had he not by this time gone off into a brown study. His sister's voice recalled him.

'I beg your pardon,' he exclaimed. 'What did you say?'

'I asked you to finish your remarks about Mrs. Nugent,' answered Horatia. 'Not that I care to hear them, but it is quite necessary for some one to correct these bearish habits of yours, Maurice—beginning a sentence and going to sleep in the middle. We shall have people saying you have softening of the brain next.'

'I beg your pardon, Horatia,' said Mr. Chesney again; adding good-naturedly, 'what was I saying about Mrs. Nugent? O, I was only thinking to myself that when she was young she must have been such a girl as one seldom has the good luck to fall in with. Indeed, I don't think she could have fallen far short of my pet ideal of

> "That not impossible she,
> Whoe'er she be,
> That shall command my heart and me."

Though I'm beginning to fear she is an "impossible she," after all. But we must wait, and perhaps she'll turn up some day yet.'

He spoke as if half affecting to be thinking aloud, and went on humming another verse of the old lines he had quoted; but that there was an intentional under-current of meaning in his careless words, Miss Chesney, by the light of his yesterday's confidence to her sister-in-law, was quite acute enough to discover, and she felt, not unnaturally, irritated thereby. She gave a slight expression of impatience. By this time Maurice had arrived at

> 'Where'er she lie,
> Lock'd up from mortal eye,
> In shady leaves of destiny.'

But Horatia's ejaculation, and an exclamation of

'Can't you eat your breakfast without singing over it like a maniac?' from Sir Robert, who had just wakened up from his letters, sobered him at once; and, anxious to change the subject, he inquired of Horatia if she knew anything about Mrs. Marshall.

'How should I?' said Miss Chesney testily. 'Yes, by the bye,' she added, and her unwonted amiability really made Maurice begin to think she must be 'fey;' 'I remember, when we were at Vichy, getting a letter from Mrs. Bland, in which she said "our new neighbour, Mrs. Marshall, is charming."'

'Charming!' repeated Maurice in amazement. 'Upon my word, but our respected vicaress must have "a mighty pretty taste" in her own sex.'

'I really wish, Maurice, you would not use such extraordinary expressions,' said Horatia; 'I have heard several people remark upon that pedantic *petit-maître* way of talking you have got into, and that trotting in absurd little quotations. So affected, and such a bad style of affectation—like a schoolmaster! Pray, why should not Mrs. Bland describe Mr. Marshall's wife as charming? What can you possibly know of her? She may be so in her own way. I have heard you yourself call old Phyllis at the dairy charming.'

'So she is, and so is the dairy itself, particularly

on a hot day,' rejoined Maurice, without taking any notice of the snub; 'and so are a good many other things and people. But how can any one call Mrs. Marshall charming? Wait till you have seen her, Horatia, and for once in your life you'll agree with me. There is nothing I dislike more than to hear one woman speak of another as "charming." I never think of believing she means it, of course; but really, in this case, Mrs. Bland must have been joking—can she joke?—or else she honestly thinks her new friend charming, in the sense of a foil to her own waning charms.'

'Where did you see her, Maurice?' asked Sir Robert, who, notwithstanding his grimness, was no exception to the rest of mankind in being now and then open to enjoy a little discussion of his neighbours' weak points. 'You seem to be unusually well-informed about these new-comers. Have you been gossiping with old Nugent already?'

Maurice laughed good-humouredly.

'No, indeed,' he replied; 'all I know of the "charming" lady is what my own eyes told me. I met her driving out here with her husband one day, before you all went abroad. When they first came to look at The Feathers, it must have been. I only saw her

for an instant; but she really was so ugly and so gorgeous, and so terrible altogether, I felt quite sorry to think she was the wife of that nice sensible man.'

'You won't want me to call on her, I suppose, Robert?' asked Miss Chesney, as she rose from the table.

'Not for her own sake, certainly,' replied Sir Robert; 'but I am not sure but what I may ask you to do so, as I rather think I should like to be civil to Marshall himself; and living so near—one never knows—he might be touchy if we did not take some notice of his wife, whatever she is like. Indeed, if she is so inferior to him as Maurice says, he would probably be all the more so. He's a good tenant, and he's mixed up in that right-of-way case over by Furseley. I should rather like to hear what he has to say about it.'

'Well, I can call whenever you like,' said Horatia resignedly. 'The worse she is, perhaps, in one way, the better, for we need see the less of her. The bringing people to live so near us was the only objection to remodelling The Feathers. But I don't in the least mind calling on them, of course.'

'Thank you,' said Sir Robert; 'but there's no

hurry; we'll see about it.' And the little party dispersed.

Notwithstanding his appalling recollection of Mrs. Marshall, Maurice felt sorry he had said anything about her. He always felt reason to regret discussing any one with his brother and Horatia, especially any one in a different position of life. He hated the inferred superiority peeping out in his step-sister's every word and glance, and shrank from in the least appearing to take part in the arrogance which so jarred against his refinement, his good taste and good feeling. He disliked to think of Horatia's cold and critical eyes directed towards the vulgar overdressed lawyer's wife at intervals throughout the weary length of the morning service; he felt disgusted with himself, and almost thought he would stay at home; but ended by accompanying his sister, and entering the ugly old church for the first time in two years in no very amiable or philosophical state of mind.

The Feathers pew was so placed, that from where he sat it was almost impossible to avoid looking straight at its occupants; so Mr. Chesney, not wishing to do so, sat for the first half of the service staring alternately at his book and his boots, feeling—

and, it must be confessed, looking—very cross and disagreeable. There was nothing to soothe his ruffled feelings: no improvement of any kind in the service—Mr. Bland's voice had grown no more musical; the organist played the same excruciatingly-ugly old hymn-tunes; and Maurice shuddered as he thought of that climax of misery, the sermon, about to be launched at his devoted head.

'It's no use,' he said to himself at last; 'neither to please Horatia nor any other human being will I subject myself to this torture. It gets worse and worse, and most assuredly it will make *me* worse and worse. I *won't* come next Sunday!' And forgetting everything else in the vehemence of this manful resolution, he, for the first time since entering the church, raised his head and looked about him. As a matter of course, just because he would have preferred to look in any other direction, his glances turned towards The Feathers pew. A pair of eyes, he immediately became conscious, were fixed upon him—eyes belonging to one of the occupants of Mr. Marshall's seat; and for aught Maurice knew to the contrary, they might for some time have been calmly occupied in regarding him; for they did not *quite* instantly withdraw themselves, as might have been

expected, on meeting his glance in return. There was not the slightest shadow of curiosity in their gaze—not the very faintest suspicion of boldness or intrusion; only a grave interest, a half-melancholy, half-pitying earnestness and unconscious inquiry, which filled him with a strange indescribable sensation of having, at some former period in his history, known those eyes and learnt to read their meaning. But suddenly, in far less time than it takes to tell it, the spell seemed to be broken, and the girl—for such Maurice never doubted that she was—the owner of the eyes, became aware that Mr. Chesney had observed her gaze; and while the very faintest flush overspread her pale face, she turned her head slightly aside, bending over her prayer-book; nor did she look again in his direction throughout the service. Which naturally made it all the easier for Mr. Chesney, at judicious intervals, to continue *his* observation of the stranger.

'Who can she be?' he said to himself. 'Evidently a member of the family;' for the only other occupant of the pew was Mr. Marshall, whom Maurice recognised at once. 'Let me see: can she be his daughter? I remember his saying something about his family consisting of only "one little girl." This could not be the little girl grown up already.

O dear, no; it's not two years ago, and this girl looks two or three-and-twenty. Besides, she *couldn't* be the daughter of that ugly old woman—she's far too—' 'pretty' was the word in his thoughts; but glancing again at the young lady, he hesitated to apply it. Was she pretty? No, he hardly thought she was. Her features, so far as his short glimpses of them could discover, were regular in outline, refined and delicate in their proportions; but she was far too pale to suit the idea conveyed by the word 'pretty.' Her dark soft hair was almost too smooth; all the curves of the face too drooping; and as she sat there so quietly, the face unlighted by the deep expressive eyes—its only *striking* feature—Maurice felt conscious of a want of ripple and spring about her, at variance with the youthful figure and bearing.

'She has known trouble already, whoever she is, poor thing!' thought Mr. Chesney. 'By the bye, I should not wonder if she is Miss Marshall's governess, or that old woman's companion.' But no, again he decided; she was too well-dressed; for, though he could not have given a name to the material of any part of her attire, he was yet, like most men of educated taste, perfectly able to pronounce on the general

effect of the whole; and in the present case this was very pleasing. There was a sense, not only of brightness and softness, but of richness in the well-chosen colours and graceful 'flow' of her garments —a sort of richness quite different from the dazzling brilliancy of a Miss Berners' attire; quite different, too, from the feeling of certainty with which Miss Chesney's quiet-coloured robes always managed to impress the beholder, that they were the *very* best of their kind.

'Her face is thoroughly English, but her dress is more like that of a Frenchwoman,' was Maurice's next reflection. Altogether the interest and speculation aroused by this young person's unexpected appearance got him through his purgatory in a most satisfactory manner; for once in his life he did not feel inclined to throw a footstool at Mr. Bland's head, *à la* Jeanie Geddes; and when the time came for quitting the church, he did so in a far more Christian frame of mind than he had entered it, though he had not the faintest recollection of the sermon, and could not possibly have told what the text was.

He walked home alone; for Horatia had always some little school or old-woman business to discuss

with Mr. and Mrs. Bland after church; and Sir Robert had a Sunday habit of standing in the porch for five minutes and trying to look amiable as his vassals filed past with orthodox bob and scrape, at which little ceremony the heir presumptive did not feel himself called upon to assist.

The Feathers people had not left their seat when Mr. Chesney quitted the church, so he had no opportunity of unravelling the mystery; and all the way sauntering home he kept saying to himself, 'I wonder who that girl is. I am sure I never saw her before; and yet there is a dreamy familiarity in her face. I wonder what she knows of me, to make her look at me in that grave, pitying way. *I* feel inclined to pity *her*, somehow. I could fancy she never smiled.' In which idea, however, Mr. Chesney was very much mistaken; as, grave as she sometimes looked, Eleanor could not only smile, but laugh with the heartiness becoming her years. She *had* looked extra grave this morning, however; not that she thought it incumbent on her to put on a 'Sunday face,' but she was feeling sad. Some little accidental circumstance had prevented Georgie accompanying her as usual to church, and she missed the dear sunny face terribly. She could indeed hardly

bear it out of her sight for five minutes now; she was growing morbid on the subject of the fast-approaching separation: less than six months would see the end of the 'nearly two years' during which she had fought for leave to keep possession of her darling; and though the matter had been seldom alluded to, Mr. Marshall, she knew, had not wavered in his determination; his wife, therefore, must in no wise fall back from her promise. This was the secret, then, of Eleanor's looking so peculiarly sad this sweet April morning in Chesney church, when for the first time 'the silent music of her face' struck Mr. Chesney with that strange, half-pleasurable, half-annoying sensation of dreamy familiarity therewith, of having at some former period of his existence met her before. Probably the unmistakable look of interest in himself, which his unexpected glance had surprised in her eyes, had something to do with this impression. One cannot feel altogether a stranger to a person whom one catches looking at one with such an expression as that which Eleanor bestowed on Mr. Chesney. And yet the explanation was very simple. She was only looking at him with that pitiful, sympathising interest, because the appearance of these three members of the Chesney family in their an-

cestral pew had recalled to her mind all the odds and ends she had heard about them from Mrs. Bland and others, of which the most impression had been made on her mind by the few facts relating to Maurice's own history—facts bald enough in themselves, but suggestive to her of a lonely and isolated existence; for she was young enough to colour other people's stories with the tints prevailing in her own; and the two years that had passed since her mother's death—placid and peaceful as they had been—had brought to Eleanor Marshall no experience tending to contradict the judgment she herself had pronounced on her own life: 'I must never expect any one thoroughly to understand me again.' Then her thoughts had flown off in another direction. Looking at Maurice, she had tried to realise what she had heard of childless Lady Chesney's great love for him, and she fell to wondering if it could be as great as her own for Georgie.

'I *could* not love her more, if she were my daughter instead of my sister. I wonder if she loves him like that! I wonder if she felt as miserable as I am now, when they first began to talk of sending him to school! *He* looks miserable enough now, poor fellow. I wonder if it is about that beautiful Miss

Berners!' At which exact point in her meditations Maurice had looked up and caught her eye.

Mr. Chesney did not join the family circle at luncheon that day. He was at no time, as I have confessed, particularly partial to

> 'The day that comes betwixt
> A Saturday and Monday;'

the full appreciation of which is reserved for those who obey the fourth commandment by working on the six days, as well as by resting on the seventh, —and had adopted various more or less reprehensible devices for assisting 'time and the hour' to get through their appointed task on the first day of the week with the least possible lagging by the way. As often as not, especially when he had done duty in the morning, he disappeared after service, and was seen no more till the seven-o'clock dinner—half-an-hour earlier than the same family gathering on other days, as is the manner of well-conducted families in this favoured land.

On this special Sunday, Maurice, after hastily scratching a couple of letters, got a glass of sherry and a biscuit 'somehow,' and, not quite certain how he intended to spend the rest of the day, strolled

down to the river, and amused himself for an hour or so by vainly endeavouring to teach his sister-in-law's very nondescript pet-dog to imagine itself a retriever, greatly to the scandal of the gardener's children, whose way to Sunday-school led by the river-path. At length even this excitement began to pall, and Maurice fell to thinking, as he used when a boy, that Sundays were surely twice as long as other days—why, he would have been at a loss to explain. There were the same walks to take, the same books to read. Was it all the effect of the terrible penance of the morning? Hardly so to-day: at least one half of Mr. Bland's reading and preaching had been lost on Mr. Chesney, his thoughts having been more pleasantly occupied by discreet observation of the young lady in The Feathers pew, and speculation as to who she could be. With this remembrance a new idea started into his mind. He would spend the afternoon for once in an irreproachable fashion, by going to church a second time, thereby gaining Horatia's approval for, he hoped, some days to come, and obtaining a chance of gratifying his curiosity. He looked at his watch,—there was barely time, none at least to lose, if he did not mean to do himself more harm than good in his sister's eyes by hurrying into

church after Mr. Bland had made his appearance in the reading-desk. He set off therefore at a brisk pace, but with all his dispatch was only just in time not to be too late. The last chords of the voluntary were sounding on the organ as he took his accustomed seat in the gloomy square pew. It struck him that the tones were fuller and richer than usual.

'Can they have been patching up the old thing?' he said to himself. 'It is hardly conceivable that Burton has improved in his playing; and, by the bye, he was worse than ever this morning. It must be only my fancy; perhaps it's a miraculous reward to me for being so good as to come twice to church, for it was quite as much the music as the sermons that kept me away.'

But, as he thought thus, the familiar words of the service began; everybody stood up, and Mr. Chesney took advantage of the general movement to glance in the direction of Mr. Marshall's pew. He was disappointed. The young lady was not there, though the grizzled head of the owner of the pew rose up from the same seat as in the morning, and at the other end a small figure occupied the place of the mysterious young lady. A glance was enough to satisfy Maurice that the small figure was not that

of a person so advanced in years as to render it necessary for his observation to be carried on in as surreptitious a manner as that of the morning; she was quite a child. So he looked again, openly enough, and soon discovered she was well worth looking at; as lovely a child, indeed, as he ever remembered to have seen. Small for her age—though nearly twelve she looked barely ten — Georgie Urquhart, with her *really* golden hair, her marvellous complexion, her great innocent questioning blue eyes, was one of those rare creatures that are lovely at every age; from toddling two to lissome seventeen, one could never wish to see her other than at the present. Her beauty grew from childhood into womanhood as gracefully as a rose-bud develops into a rose. Her clothes always fitted her, without any economical suggestions of last year's leavings or next year's growth. No one could question her loveliness. Spiteful people consoled themselves with the reflection, that 'those pretty children always turn out plain women;' kindly ones whispered, 'She can never be lovelier than she is.' No wonder Maurice looked again and again at the sweet picture, and felt more than ever puzzled to explain the mysterious inconsistencies of the lawyer's household.

He was still meditating on the subject when the first hymn began. To his immense relief and surprise the tune was a new one—new, that is to say, to Chesney church; and being played some degrees faster than poor old Burton's funereal measure, succeeded in inspiriting the choir to a wonderful extent; so that Mr. Chesney, to his surprise, actually found himself joining quite heartily in the simple but beautiful strains.

'Wonders will never cease,' he said to himself; and his surprise increased when, at the close of the service, a short voluntary, sufficiently well played to be a pleasure instead of a penance to listen to, sent him out of church soothed and refreshed by its solemn sweetness. There was nothing out of place or ambitious in the selection of the music, and its execution was in no way remarkable; but the touch of the organist was delicate as well as firm, the passages were carefully and truly rendered, with no slurring vagueness, or even more annoying impertinent intrusion of so called 'expression' of the performer's own creation. Evidently the player loved the task—loved and reverenced the mysteriously-mingled grandeur and simplicity of the 'master thoughts' she humbly endeavoured, to the best of her ability, to

interpret for the edification of the 'two or three gathered together' in the ugly old church.

Maurice knew enough of music in general, and organ-playing in particular, to guess that the performer was a woman; and, as he again sauntered slowly home by himself, he wondered if the improvement in the music explained the absence of the young stranger from her place of the morning.

'But I can hardly believe she is that child's governess,' he hesitated. 'She hasn't the look of it somehow—though, indeed, it is almost as difficult to believe that beautiful little creature is the daughter of the worthy Mr. and Mrs. Marshall. Still, nature plays strange tricks sometimes. Where on earth, for instance, did I spring from? I intend no disparagement, but the reverse, of *my* respected progenitors, when I confess that in no one trait of person or character can I discover in myself the least resemblance to any of them I have ever heard tell of. All the better for them, however. Perhaps two or three hundred years ago my antetype existed an unfortunate individual, of whom no record had been handed down to posterity; naturally enough, as I am quite sure he was a most useless and contemptible member of society, who never did any good for himself or any

one else, and had only enough irksome scruples, or conscience, or principles—whatever you like to call it—in him, to prevent his going comfortably to the bad, like many better people. Poor fellow, I wonder what became of him! I pity him, though I devoutly wish it had not been fated that his undesirable idiosyncrasies should crop out again in me.'

And half serious, half mocking at his own reflections, Maurice forgot all about the occupants of The Feathers pew, and, fatigued by his unwonted exertions, fell asleep over the *Saturday Review* in his own room when he got home, and only wakened in time to dress for the solemn family dinner at seven o'clock.

CHAPTER III.

UNAPPRECIATED CONDESCENSION.

'There should be a distinction between
The wife of a patrician and plebeian.'

MASSINGER.

'In Tiefen unberühret
Wächst einsam das Metall;
Wo's nachtet und gefrieret,
Sich bildet der Krystall.'

KERNER.

SOME incidental remark during dinner recalled Maurice's curiosity on the subject of the new tenants. 'What has come over old Burton?' he inquired carelessly of Horatia, beating about the bush as had come to be his habit when conversing with so objectionably acute an individual as his sister.

'What should have become of him?' replied Miss Chesney tartly. 'You might have seen him in his usual place this morning, if you had chosen to look.'

'I beg your pardon,' Maurice answered mildly,

'the organ-loft is not visible from my corner of the dungeon, so see him I could not. *Hear* him I certainly did, but that was this morning. It was this afternoon I missed his

"Soul-animating strains."

I beg your pardon, Horatia, I really do,' he added hastily, detecting the beginning of a frown on her face. 'I forgot again that my silly habit of trotting in quotations annoys you.'

Horatia took no notice of his apology, but turned to address Sir Robert.

'I suppose you know who played the organ this afternoon, Robert,' she observed. 'I saw Mr. Bland speaking to you, and I *suppose* he asked your leave.'

'Not he,' answered her brother; 'he never seemed to think any leave was wanted, and, after all, it's more his business than mine. It's not like a private chapel.'

'I don't agree with you,' said Horatia, 'but of course, if you are satisfied, it is all right.'

'Who *did* play?' asked Lady Chesney, nervously anxious to say something to divert that most terrible, and it must be confessed rare, disturbance of the family harmony, a disagreement in opinion between Sir Robert and his sister. 'I did not know any one in this neighbourhood could do so.'

'It was Mrs. Marshall,' replied Miss Chesney curtly.

'Mrs. Marshall!' exclaimed Lady Chesney and Maurice in a breath.

'And why should it not be Mrs. Marshall, pray?' snapped Sir Robert, exploding on his usual victims his irritation at Horatia's difference of opinion. 'What on earth do you all make such a song about it for? Bland mentioned to me she had played in the afternoons for several months past, and I am sure she is very welcome, if she's fool enough to take the trouble. You're very ready to abuse old Burton, Maurice; why do you make such a fuss at any one else playing?'

'I was only surprised,' replied Mr. Chesney. 'I can hardly imagine Mrs. Marshall playing so well as she does.'

Horatia pricked up her ears. She forgot her dispute with Sir Robert in the delightful prospect of snubbing her step-brother.

'I think *you* cannot possibly form an opinion on the subject, Maurice,' she remarked, turning towards him. 'Let me see—how was it you described our new tenant's wife this morning—"terribly ugly," I think was one of the mildest of your expressions. I

confess I hardly agree with you. Mrs. Marshall struck me as rather a pleasing young woman—quiet and modest-looking. A little over-dressed for her station, perhaps, but I daresay she meant it well—our first Sunday at home—and of course one cannot expect much *savoir faire* from Easterton.'

'What *are* you talking about, Horatia?' exclaimed Maurice in despair, too completely puzzled to address his sister with his usual punctiliousness. 'Who is Mrs. Marshall, or where have you seen her?'

'The young lady in The Feathers pew this morning, dressed in lavender-silk and black-lace, was Mrs. Marshall,' rejoined Miss Chesney maliciously.

'*That* girl!' ejaculated Maurice in undisguised amazement. 'Good heavens, Horatia, you must be mistaken. It would be too monstrous. That refined-looking young creature old Marshall's wife!'

'Really, Maurice, you are too absurd,' replied his sister, already—thanks to his unguarded expressions—more than half inclined to change her tactics and desert Mrs. Marshall, whom out of contradiction she had had some misty idea of patronising. '"Monstrous." What a word to use! I have no doubt your "refined-looking young creature" (she looks quite seven- or eight-and-twenty) is exceedingly well

satisfied with her fate. Why, Mr. Marshall must have been one of the great "catches," as they call it, of Easterton, and there are six times as many young women there as bachelors. Mrs. Bland has often told me her husband was quite persecuted by Easterton attentions when he first came here, before they found out he was engaged to be married, and naturally it gave her rather a dislike to the place. But she seems to like Mrs. Marshall. I wonder she has not given her a hint about her dress, though. Mrs. Bland is so sensible in that sort of thing—suits herself to her position.'

'Or to her purse,' said Maurice, 'and if so, all the more credit to her. I don't suppose she would have any objection to dress better, if she could manage it, poor woman. But she certainly would have hard work to make herself look like Mrs. Marshall, if that *was* Mrs. Marshall, which I find uncommonly hard to believe. What was wrong with her dress? I should like to know what "over-dressed" means. It seemed to me very soft and pretty. I am sure the colours were quiet enough, compared to Amethyst Berners' get-up, for instance, the last time I saw her; and I never hear you call *her* "over-dressed."'

'Amethyst Berners!' exclaimed Miss Chesney.

'Amethyst Berners and Mrs. Marshall are two *very* different people.'

'So I should say,' muttered Maurice under his breath, but his step-sister caught the words.

It was a mischievous imp that inspired him to irritate Horatia by his uncalled-for defence of the young stranger, whose face had so impressed him, and why he did so he could scarcely himself have explained. A vague feeling of annoyance was the only motive he was conscious of; annoyance amounting to something not unlike positive disgust at the discovery of the young lady's actual position. The fact of her being the wife of an elderly, commonplace individual, like Mr. Marshall the lawyer, jarred upon Mr. Chesney's good taste and sense of the fitness of things, and rendered him all the more sensitive to his sister's not particularly-refined comments on the stranger and her attire. It was very absurd of him to feel personally affronted by Horatia's disparagement of a person of whom he knew literally nothing but that she had a sweet pale face and deep sad eyes, and was married to a man old enough to be her father. Maurice was perfectly conscious of the absurdity, but the consciousness only made him the crosser. So he said no more, and the family meal progressed

with rather less than its usual infinitesimal amount of geniality. Suddenly, to everybody's surprise, Sir Robert broke in with an unexpected observation.

'You're quite wrong as to Mrs. Marshall's antecedents, Horatia,' he said, evidently not sorry in his present mood to seize an opportunity of contradicting his sister. 'She doesn't come from Easterton. I don't suppose she ever saw the place in her life. She is more than half French—been brought up on the Continent, at least—so Bland told me—and Marshall married her abroad and brought her straight here. I think your usual discrimination must have failed you to-day, Horatia. Any one with half an eye might have seen *that* girl never came out of Easterton.'

Maurice felt marvellously soothed by this explanation of his brother's, notwithstanding the patent unamiability of the motives which had led to his vouchsafing it. Horatia leant back on her chair with a half-stifled yawn, in affectation of indifference.

'I really did not give the lady the close attention you and Maurice appear to have bestowed upon her, my dear Robert,' she said carelessly; 'my only impression from my glance at her was, that she appeared a nice-looking person rather over-dressed. It is a mistake many people fall into—that of thinking that

middle-class people imbibe taste and refinement with the air, if they happen to spend two or three years "on the Continent," as they call it! As if all the Continent were Paris, and as if there were not *bourgeois* in Paris as well as everywhere else.'

Miss Chesney's air and tone were very fine. Maurice enjoyed them exceedingly, all the more so from recognising the actual discomfiture they were intended to conceal. Sir Robert, whose duller perceptions were in this instance quickened by his spiteful pleasure in 'having the best of it' in a discussion with Horatia, was not slow to perceive his victory, nor generous enough to refrain from pursuing his victim yet farther.

'You're wrong again, Horatia,' he replied, with as near an approach to a genial smile as he often allowed himself. 'I know nothing about her dress—all women look much the same as far as that's concerned, it strikes me—but you can't exactly class Mrs. Marshall among your *bourgeois*, however she's dressed. Bland tells me she was a Miss Urquhart—Urquharts of ——. Her grandfather or great uncle, I can't make out which, was a capital old fellow. Many a time I have dined with them when I was a boy, and my father had the shooting up there—Lord Lochness's

shooting, you remember? The Urquharts made an end of their possessions certainly, but for all that you can't call a good old Scotch—' But his sentence was never completed. For once in her life Miss Chesney was rude enough to interrupt her elder brother.

'My dear Robert,' she exclaimed, holding up her hands in despair, 'have pity on me! I give in. I surrender absolutely, whenever the word "Scotch" is named. Did you ever know *anybody* Scotch who was *not* of good family? If so, you have been more fortunate than I. But for heaven's sake let us change the subject. Mrs. Marshall may be a duchess in disguise, for all I would venture to assert to the contrary. But, nevertheless, I am getting very tired of her. I really think Maurice's "terribly ugly old woman" would have been a more desirable neighbour than a young person who has managed to create such a romantic interest in herself and her antecedents, as appears to be the case. Do let us change the subject.'

After this, no more was said, good, bad, or indifferent, about the new tenants. Maurice's interest, however, was still more aroused by what he had heard, and he wondered more than ever how the girl whose glance he had caught in church could have

come to marry the Easterton lawyer. The discussion left an uncomfortable feeling on his mind; he wished somehow it had not taken place.

'I'm a great fool for my pains,' he said to himself, 'to trouble myself about a total stranger. But there is something about that Mrs. Marshall, whatever her history is, that makes me dislike to hear her sneered at, in that unbearable way Horatia sneers at any woman she doesn't take to. And most evidently she has taken a prejudice to that poor girl, for no reason on earth but that she looks like a lady though her husband's an attorney! And when once Horatia takes a prejudice, she *does* take one. It's a pity, though I daresay it will not matter to Mrs. Marshall.'

With which reflection he dismissed the subject from his mind. Nothing occurred to revive it for some days, when sitting with Lady Chesney one morning, she mentioned casually, to his great surprise, that Mr. and Mrs. Marshall were coming to dine at the Court the following day.

'Mr. and Mrs. Marshall!' exclaimed Mr. Chesney in amazement. 'But, my dear Elizabeth, Horatia has never called; and I know she took one of her violent antipathies to that unfortunate young woman

the Sunday there was such a discussion about her. How can they be coming to dinner, if Horatia has never called?'

Lady Chesney looked round nervously, before venturing to smile a little as she replied,

'Horatia *has* called. Whenever there is any discussion between her and Robert, she is sure in the long-run to give in. Besides, she never said she would not call; she told me she had offered to do so, though it was easy to see she did not like the idea.'

'Not after she had seen for herself, as she *did*, whatever she may say about it, that Mrs. Marshall is not a person she can patronise like that sickening toady, Mrs. Bland,' broke in Maurice; 'and I really wonder how Robert brought her round. What does she say of Mrs. Marshall?'

'She was out, I believe,' answered Lady Chesney, 'or else Horatia did not ask if she was at home. I know no particulars, except that Horatia told me Robert wished her to call, and I gave her one of my cards. Then yesterday, Robert asked me to invite them to dine here with the Blands. We must have the Blands, you know, before we go up to town on Thursday; and Horatia said to-morrow would be

best, the day but one before we go, and she wrote the note for me; and this morning Mrs. Marshall answered, accepting. Horatia said, "Of course," when I told her they were coming, but she did not seem to mind.'

Maurice laughed slightly, and turned to leave the room, whistling as he went.

It was with no overwhelming raptures *à la* Mrs. Bland, that Eleanor received in the first place the cards, and a day or two afterwards the gracious invitation to dinner, of Sir Robert and Lady Chesney. She threw it aside with a slight expression of impatience, that made little Georgie look up and ask what was the matter.

'Nothing particular, dear,' answered Nelly.

It never struck her, that at Georgie's age little girls are not usually allowed to cross-question their elders, or to expect answers to their inquiries, should they be guilty of such indiscretion; the sisters' isolated life, dependent on each other for all companionship and daily sympathy, had gradually tended to bridge over the actual gulf of years between them.

'But it is, must be, something particular, Nelly,' persisted the child. 'You don't look vexed and say "Bother!" for nothing.'

'I *shouldn't* do so for anything, I suppose,' answered Eleanor, laughing; 'but as you are so very anxious to know, Miss Georgie, the matter is, that this is an invitation to dinner at the Court, for Mr. Marshall and me.'

'And wouldn't you like to go, Nelly?' exclaimed her sister. 'I should, *very* much.'

'Ah, yes; but then you are young, darling, and I am old,' quoth Nelly.

'Not so very,' remonstrated Georgie in perfect good faith. 'You are only a very little past twenty-one, that isn't very old.'

'I am in my twenty-second year, Georgie, and I am about forty really. Anyway, I am too old to care to make new acquaintances.'

'I wish *I* were old enough to go,' sighed Georgie, stopping for the twentieth time over the copying out of a particularly irregular French verb that was greatly annoying her. 'I should so like to see ever so many pretty ladies, nicely dressed.'

'And to be nicely dressed yourself, you little puss,' suggested Eleanor. 'Well, I wish, too, you were old enough to go. That would make it quite different. But for myself, I dislike it very much. Still, we must see what Mr. Marshall says.'

Georgie's remarks had, however, given her a new idea on the subject. For her young sister's sake, though not for her own, would it not perhaps be foolish, if not worse, to yield to her ever-increasing dislike to mixing again in any sort of society—to refuse such very rare opportunities of taking her place among other ladies, as came in her way? There was no affectation in her almost unnatural love of retirement. Quietly as the two years of her married life had passed, they had left no trace of shyness or self-consciousness in her bearing and manners. It was simply the fact that she did not *care* for the social amusements, to most women of her age a very necessity of existence. At the time when most girls' whole ideas are occupied with the anticipated or realised delights of 'coming out,' poor Nelly's thoughts had been very differently occupied; then came her marriage, with its anomalous circumstances, followed by the settling down into the almost unbroken seclusion of her life at The Feathers. So the natural period for pleasure in such things as balls and picnics, croquet and waltzing, had passed by, and the but half-awakened desires for youth's usual enjoyments had died away, unsatisfied, into unconsciousness; and Eleanor honestly believed that under no

circumstances could she have cared for such things like other girls, that she had always been 'too old' to enter into them with hearty graceful zest.

'It is all best as it is,' she sometimes said to herself. 'It is a very good thing I married a man so much older than myself. I should never have suited a young husband.'

And yet, though she not only said so, but thoroughly believed it, there were times in which she puzzled herself; times in which the bounding sense, not merely of life, but of youth—strong, beautiful youth—in her veins, more than half upset her theories of being, after all, so very different from other girls; times in which, temporarily forgetful of her already decided 'fate,' of the small gold band which irrevocably separated her from girlhood and its unfettered privileges, Nelly found herself dreaming vaguely of some bright future, never to be hers, some ideal completeness of existence too seldom realised in the most apparently harmonious unions. And then, with a start less of horror than of self-contempt for being 'so absurdly romantic,' she would recall her truant fancy, and repeat to herself, 'It was all best as it was,' with which judgment nine out of every ten observers would have concurred. For of

all girls, Eleanor appeared the one most likely to satisfy and be satisfied as an old man's wife. Gentle, submissive, content with a monotonous, uneventful life, with no superabundance of animal spirits, though, at first sight of her surroundings, one might feel inclined to pity, closer inspection would have been pretty sure to lead one to decide she was in the place best suited to her, enjoying the calm happiness her equable nature was alone capable of appreciating. For it is not one in every ten, nor one in every hundred, that has discrimination to discern the depths of a nature to all outward appearance unimpassioned, placid, calm, if not cold. And the only amount of self-knowledge to which Eleanor had as yet attained was, that now and then 'herself puzzled herself,' poor child!

She was young enough, anyway, to be greatly enjoying a game of battledore and shuttlecock with Georgie, on the bowling-green, the evening of the day on which the invitation had been received, when Mr. Marshall stepped out through the glass-door and joined them unexpectedly. They had been so absorbed in their game as not to hear him drive up; besides which, he was a little earlier than usual. A kindly smile lit up his prosaic, somewhat care-worn

face, as he noticed their occupation, and bid them not stop short at the triumph of 'two hundred and eighty-nine' to bid him welcome. He sat down on a garden-chair and watched them with interest, though looking somewhat weary. Had he been a father returning to his two young daughters, after the toils of the day, the picture would have been a pleasing one.

Mr. Marshall has aged since we saw him two years ago. He has both aged and grown more anxious-looking. The reason of this change is no mystery. It is not to be found in the secrets of his domestic life: *that* had more than realised—I was about to say, 'his fondest anticipations,' but the idea of a Mr. Marshall 'fondly anticipating' anything is incongruous—I will rather say, it had more than realised, altogether surpassed, his very sober and reasonable hopes. Never in all his untended life had the poor bachelor been so completely and thoroughly *comfortable*. For Nelly, though 'fatherless, brotherless,' was one of those delightful women that seem born to minister to the wants of the ruder sex, so magically did she divine the various little particulars that go to make the home-comfort of that magnificent lord of the creation—man. Certainly, she gave her

whole mind to it, which says a good deal: gratitude, real or imagined, being in a nature like hers no weak or fitful motive. Then, too, she had ample time and quite enough money at her disposal; so perhaps, as Mrs. Bland used to remark snappishly to her Charles when he was rash enough to allude to the attractions of Mr. Marshall's home—the perfection of the simple unpretending little dinners, the good taste of the young wife's attire—'There would be no excuse for her if it were otherwise.' Still, praiseworthy or not, the results of Eleanor's care were eminently satisfactory to her husband, who revelled in the new delights of shirts that knew not what it was to be buttonless, socks so darned that economy became a positive luxury, and, hardly less important, legs of mutton invariably subjected to a proper amount of hanging before roasting, and coffee prepared with a perfection of which, it must be confessed, great part was owing to Mrs. Marshall's foreign education.

So it is not at home we are to look for the explanation of the increasing wrinkles on the lawyer's forehead, the fading to snow-white of the already grizzled hair. The secret is to be found in the dingy recesses of the Easterton office. Not that things were

going ill with the country lawyer; on the contrary, too well. His business was getting too much for him: he was, in short, over-worked. Now and then he thought of taking a partner; but the idea was invariably dismissed, old habit being too strong to contemplate any such innovation save with the most unconquerable repugnance; so things went on as they were, Mr. Marshall constantly saying to himself, 'Next month or the month after will see me through the thick of this work,' and 'next month' coming and going with no diminution of his cares, but leaving its unmistakable mark on the brain and bearing of the over-burdened man. He said little to Eleanor on the subject. It did not come naturally to him to be very communicative about his private affairs; he had married too late in life to look upon a wife in the light of a second self; and besides this he intensely enjoyed the novelty and refreshment of his hours at home, altogether distinct and separate from the associations of the Easterton office, which for so many dreary years had represented to him all the interests, hopes, and excitements of his existence. Eleanor, on her part, though not blind to her husband's increasing symptoms of overworked mind and brain, was too ignorant and unpractical to look upon them

as other than quite unavoidable, and consoled herself with doing her utmost in her own department, so that Mr. Marshall might literally feel, when he turned his back on Easterton for the day, that he left all his cares behind him.

The shuttlecock fell at last.

'Three hundred and fifty-six!' screamed Georgie, but in the same breath an 'O, you naughty Nelly!' proclaimed its descent; and Eleanor found herself free to give her attention to her husband. She hastened towards him, where he sat on the garden-chair in a wearied attitude.

'What a lovely day it has been!' he remarked, as she drew near. 'It is almost impossible to believe we are only at the beginning of May. I fancy we are going to have a very hot summer. I feel the heat already a good deal.'

'I fear that shows you are not so strong as you were,' said Nelly anxiously. 'I do so wish you were not *quite* so busy, Mr. Marshall. Will you be as busy all this summer?'

'O no, I fancy not,' he replied. 'There is an extra pressure of things just now; but I daresay they will fall off again in a little.'

'I hope so,' rejoined Eleanor; 'but I think you

are extra tired this evening. Wouldn't you like a cup of tea? It is an hour to dinner. I'll run and get it in a minute;' and she was flying off, when he stopped her.

'No, thank you, my dear,' he said; 'I had a glass of sherry as I came in. Nothing rests me better than just sitting out here in the cool air for a little. Well, and what have you been doing with yourselves all day?'

A little recital of the day's simple round of occupations and pleasures followed this customary question. Then there fell a little pause, till Eleanor suddenly bethought herself of the invitation to the Court.

'O, by the bye,' she exclaimed, as she drew the note out of her pocket, 'this came to-day. I could not answer it till I had asked you what to say;' and she gave it to Mr. Marshall.

He glanced at it, and a pleased look came over his face.

'Very nice, very attentive,' he observed, as he handed it back to his wife; 'you need have had no hesitation in answering it, my dear.'

'My dear' looked rather dismayed.

'O, then, do you think we must go?' she asked plaintively.

'Of course, my dear, I never doubted it,' he answered, with a look of surprise. 'Not that there is any *must* about it, but I see no reason for declining a kindly meant and, I may say, a—a very gratifying attention. You hardly understand, my love,' for indeed Nelly looked puzzled; 'abroad I suppose things are so different. But I assure you, my dear Eleanor, it is not *everybody* that would have been asked to dine at the Court merely through being tenants here. No Easterton young lady ever received such an invitation, I am quite sure.'

'But I am not an Easterton young lady,' said Eleanor, looking up with cheeks slightly flushing; 'I am your wife, Mr. Marshall, and whatever I was before—an Easterton young lady or any other young lady—makes no difference.'

'I don't know that,' said Mr. Marshall, smiling, partly at what he thought Eleanor's amusing simplicity, partly at the pleasing reflection that had instantly passed through his own mind, 'They must have seen her at church these two last Sundays—I saw them glance in our direction.' Poor man! well was it for his innocent pride in his young wife's beauty and refinement that he had not heard Horatia's sneers at her 'over-dressed' appearance, or her re-

flections, that if one must have to do with 'that sort of people, the worse they are the better — it makes it easier to keep them in their place.' But Mr. Marshall was in blissful ignorance of the Chesney comments on his wife, so 'I don't know that,' he repeated, as his glance fell on her graceful figure and sweet eager face.

'Then do you really, really want me to accept it?' asked Nelly dolefully.

'Yes, I do, my dear,' he answered, adding kindly, 'I would not of course wish you to do so, if it were actually disagreeable to you. But this I can hardly fancy is the case. Your life here is so very quiet, I am only too glad for you to have the chance of a little desirable society. It is only natural and right that any one so young as you should like the idea of it. I don't quite understand your reluctance.'

'*I* should like immensely to go to a party,' put in Georgie.

Mr. Marshall laughed.

'I have no doubt of it—' he began to say. But Nelly interrupted him.

'I won't be reluctant then,' she said heartily; 'I will go and write the note this minute, Mr. Marshall, as you wish it;' and she was turning towards the

house, when again her husband called her back. A sudden thought had struck him.

'It isn't anything to do with your dress, my dear, that is in the way?' he suggested half timidly. 'If so, though I fear there would be hardly time enough to send to London, you might have the carriage to-morrow, and drive over to Wolding and get anything you want.'

For ere this, Mr. Marshall had invested in a modest brougham and a second horse; the close carriage being desirable for his own daily journeys in bad weather, and for Mrs. Marshall on the rare occasions when she had to go any distance beyond a walk from home.

Eleanor answered gratefully:

'Thank you very much, Mr. Marshall; but I assure you I was not thinking of my dress at all. I have ever so many pretty dresses; far more indeed than I need.'

'*Mon Dieu*, I should think so!' burst in Georgie, forgetting in her excitement Mr. Marshall's dislike to the expression she had used; 'why, there is your *chiné rose*, the *bleu rayé*, the *grenadine à*—' she was rattling on like a little milliner, but her sister stopped her.

'Never mind about my dresses, dear. We can settle afterwards what I shall wear,' she said; and Mr. Marshall, though he said nothing, mentally congratulated himself on the resolution which had kept firm to the determination of sending this *enfant terrible* to school.

'Well then, my dear, I really don't see that you can have any real reason for disliking to dine at the Court,' he said to his wife; 'unless indeed you are ashamed of appearing with such an old man for your husband,' he added laughingly, but with a slight undertone of real anxiety in his voice.

Eleanor came and stood close beside him, looking into his face with a pretty reproach in her gray eyes.

'O, Mr. Marshall!' she exclaimed, 'that is very naughty of you. You know, if you say things like that, it will make me—no, never mind! But you *know* it is not anything of that kind. I can hardly say why I don't want to go. It is just a sort of feeling of having got out of the way of going into any society—a sort of reluctance to break in upon our peaceful, happy life.'

'I am only too glad to hear you find it peaceful and happy, my dear,' said Mr. Marshall kindly; 'but still I think it would be wrong not to avail yourself

of any little distraction that offers, and I have no doubt you will come to agree with me.'

'Very well; then I will write my answer at once,' said Eleanor cheerfully, and in a few minutes she appeared with her note ready for inspection and approval.

'There is still nearly an hour to dinner-time,' she said hesitatingly; 'do you mind my going to play the organ for half an hour, Mr. Marshall? I would not go so late, but I am very anxious to practise every day just now, as I have several new things to learn this week; and to tell the truth, playing with Georgie this afternoon, I forgot about practising.'

'Go by all means, my dear,' replied her husband. 'Have you to fetch the key?'

'O, no; Mr. Bland has given me a duplicate key of the little side-door that I keep here,' she answered, as she ran off brightly, calling to Georgie to accompany her.

CHAPTER IV.

DINING AT THE COURT.

'Great plenty, much formality, small cheer,
And everybody out of their own sphere.'

LORD BYRON.

'I DON'T like leaving you even for one evening, Georgie,' confessed Eleanor, the morning of the day on which Mr. and Mrs. Marshall were to dine at Chesney Court. 'However, I am glad Mrs. Bland asked you to go there to tea. I really think you like playing with those little boys of hers far better than if they were girls.'

'Of course I do; girls of that age,' said Georgie contemptuously, 'are such little geese. Charlie and Tommy Bland are not afraid of anything; that's why I like them. And it is such fun to see how shocked their nurses are when the boys tell about our climbing up trees; and they daren't say anything to me,

for I answer them so dreadfully politely, they can't tell what to think. The old nurse always says, "O, Master Charlie, you must be mistaken. Miss Urquhart is far too pretty-behaved a young lady to do any such thing."'

Eleanor laughed.

'But, Georgie,' she said, 'you must be careful. They are such little fellows. I should be very sorry for you to lead them into mischief.'

'But I don't really, Nelly dear,' replied Georgie reassuringly. 'I am truly very careful; but their mamma is so silly; she won't let them do anything nice like other boys. They are never so happy as when they are with me.'

Household matters, and some of the rare visitors from Easterton, so ran away with Mrs. Marshall's time that day, that it was late in the afternoon before she found herself free to repair to the church for her much-desired organ practice. Though only May, the weather had been oppressively hot and sultry, and various signs betokened a probable thunder-storm. Eleanor felt fagged and wearied, but reluctant to neglect her self-imposed duty. So she fetched the church key, and called to Georgie to go with her as usual.

'It is just four,' she said as the child joined her. 'You are not expected at the Blands' till half-past. Get a story-book, and come and sit a little while in the church while I play, and then you can run the little way to the Vicarage by yourself.'

'But then I can't see you when you're dressed, Nelly,' objected the child.

'You should have thought of that before you accepted your small friends' invitation,' answered Nelly unsympathisingly; 'but never mind; you have seen my dress any way, and I promise you I shall come into your room at night when we come home.'

With this consolation Georgie was fain to be content, and set off with her sister to the church.

When they got there, Mrs. Marshall at once turned towards the stair leading to the organ-loft, leaving Georgie comfortably established with her usual fairy-tales on a bench near the door.

'I can't come down again to tell you when it is half-past four,' said the elder sister, 'for I have so little time to spare. But you had better run off when you hear the clock strike the half-hour. Shall I send Ned down to remind you? for I know, when you have those fairy-tales, you forget everything.'

'If Ned stops blowing, you must stop playing,' answered Georgie sagely. 'O no, I shall listen for the clock. I am not sure that I shall read at all. I am tired, and I like to hear you play from this end of the church; it sounds so soft and nice.'

'Very well. Good-night, darling!' said Nelly, kissing the child as tenderly as if they were about to be separated for a month. 'Mrs. Bland's nurse-maid will bring you home.'

'O yes, she always does. She likes a walk in the evening,' answered the little girl, adding, as her sister left her, 'Be *sure* you come into my room at night when you come home.'

In a few moments the tones of the organ broke the silence. It was not a bad instrument for a village church, and, wonderful to say, notwithstanding Mr. Chesney's disparagement, its best days were *not* over, as one is usually informed is the case with the organs of country churches. To Georgie Urquhart, at least, when played by Nelly, its music appeared little short of sublime; and even her fairy-tales were powerless to attract her from the pleasure of listening dreamily, with half-shut eyes, to the beautiful sounds.

Only her seat was rather hard, and there was

nothing against which she could comfortably lean her head; so, as the half-hour had not yet struck, she resolved, after fidgeting about for some time, to try a change of quarters. The great square Chesney pew was close at hand. Hideous as Maurice thought its dungeon-like recesses, to Georgie just then its dingy cushions looked very inviting and attractive. She entered, and pulling one or two hassocks out of their places, so as to form a sort of nest for her small person, she curled herself up like a dormouse with great satisfaction, to listen to Nelly's music, reflecting, as she did so, that after all it would not much signify if she were a little late in presenting herself at the Vicarage, the nursery tea in that highly irregular establishment not being a punctual institution.

Eleanor went on playing for some time without stopping. The voluntary with which she intended to regale the ears of the congregation on the following Sunday was a more ambitious affair than any she had hitherto attempted, and took her whole attention. But she was pleased to find herself gradually mastering its intricacies; and she was so absorbed, that more than an hour had passed before it occurred to her to think of the time. She drew out her watch, and started to find it so late.

'Dear me,' she exclaimed; 'Mr. Marshall will be home and wondering what has become of me.—You can stop, Ned; that will do for to-night,' turning to the very hot little boy, who was only too glad to obey her.

'Georgie must have run off ever so long ago,' said Eleanor to herself, as she passed the empty seat where she had left her sister; and followed by Ned, she stepped out at the little door by which she had entered, locked it, and, putting the key in her pocket, hastened home.

The air was still close and sultry, and distant growls announced thunder in the neighbourhood.

'Are we going to have a storm?' said Eleanor as she ran in, meeting her husband at the door, her face flushed with the quick pace at which she had been walking.

'An attempt at one, perhaps,' said Mr. Marshall, glancing up at the sky as he spoke; 'it won't be much. But, my dear, you should not over-heat yourself by running so fast.'

'I was so afraid of being late, and that you would wonder where I was. Georgie is at the Blands', and I forgot the time in playing the organ,' answered Mrs. Marshall on her way upstairs, stopping half-

way in her ascent to inquire if they were to drive or walk to the Court.

'Drive, by all means,' replied her husband; 'if it is not raining already, it is sure to do so soon.'

The storm, however, appeared likely to exhaust itself in thunder of a mild description, and no rain fell; so Eleanor extorted a promise from Mr. Marshall, that if it kept fine, they should walk home.

No one could have accused the lawyer's young wife that evening, as she walked into the great drawing-room at the Court, of anything so heinous as 'over-dressing.' Notwithstanding Georgie's loudly-expressed preference for the beautiful pink 'chiné,' or at least the delicately-brilliant 'grenadine,' Nelly had persisted in attiring herself in what her sister considered the 'very ugliest' of all her dresses; that is to say, though rich in material, it was sober in hue—more befitting an imaginary 'Mr. Marshall's wife' than the slight girlish-looking creature who actually bore that title. The truth was, her husband's half-laughing inquiry, as to whether she was 'ashamed of making her appearance with such an old husband,' had not been forgotten by Eleanor, and the whole innocent design of her toilette was 'to make herself look old.' And the belief that she had thor-

oughly succeeded in this intention greatly added to her peace of mind and inward satisfaction. What would she have thought, had she been able to read Mr. Chesney's mental criticism on her appearance as she sat beside him at the dinner-table?

'What a child she is!' he said to himself; 'she looks ever so much younger close at hand than at a distance. I took her for two- or three-and-twenty in church; but now she looks barely eighteen. How on earth did she come to marry that old fellow? It puzzles me more than ever. How marvellously her face lights up when she smiles!'

And having discovered this promising fact, he set himself to study the light and shade of the young face a little more closely.

'Your little friend has not left you, I hope, Mrs. Marshall,' he began. 'I missed her from her usual place on Sunday afternoon.'

'My little friend!' she repeated, looking rather puzzled. And then, the light breaking on her—'O, Georgie, you mean. O no, she lives with us; this is her home. She will nev—' But here she stopped abruptly, and the sudden look of distress, before which the brightness faded out of her whole expression, puzzled Maurice, while it increased his interest in the owner of this tell-tale countenance.

'What a lovely child she is!' he went on, wishing to gratify her by his real admiration of the golden-haired little damsel—'at least I suppose I may say so? She is so very young, one may surely be allowed to admire her openly.'

Eleanor smiled again with pleasure.

'Yes, is she not exquisitely pretty?' she said quite frankly, adding, with amusing *naïveté*, 'she is not the *least* like me, is she?'

Maurice hesitated a moment in his reply. His experience of young ladies had been too terrible for him not to feel his way cautiously on a first introduction. The days were long past in which he used, careless of consequences, to blurt out his real opinion on any subject in heaven or earth, their own charms included. Before answering, he glanced up in Eleanor's face: its perfect ingenuousness reassured him.

'No,' he replied gravely, still looking at her steadily, 'I certainly see no likeness at all. But why should there be any, Mrs. Marshall? The little girl is no relation of yours, is she? She is not your—' He hesitated for an instant, and Eleanor finished his sentence for him, laughing softly as she did so.

'Not my daughter, you were going to say, were you not?' she exclaimed. 'I assure you I should

not be the very least offended if you had taken her for my daughter. I should like to look old enough to be her mother; for *really* I quite feel as if I were. And I am not very young, after all. She is my sister, Mr. Chesney; but very few people guess the relationship, we are so unlike. I am so glad you think her pretty.'

What could Maurice do but reiterate the admiration, so evidently grateful to his companion? Fortunately it was sincere; otherwise, under the gaze of those gray eyes, he might have found it a more embarrassing task.

He took advantage of the decided success which had attended his first attempt at conversation, and did not allow it to drop. He had plenty of tact, when he chose to take the trouble of exerting himself, and, feeling really interested in his companion, succeeded in 'drawing her out' to an extent that startled her, when she looked back upon it. Though the party assembled round Sir Robert's dining-table was but eight in number, the conversation was not general, as is usually the case where the guests are few. Lady Chesney was tired, and glad to talk to nobody, and to sit at the side of the table, leaving Horatia to do the honours, and to discuss 'parish'

vehemently with her satellites the Blands. Sir Robert's head was full of the Furseley case, and he was not sorry that Lady Chesney's preference for the side of the table gave him Mr. Marshall for his left-hand neighbour, as he soon managed to bring the conversation round to the absorbing topic. So everybody was busy chattering about what interested them most, and a *tête-à-tête* between Mr. Chesney and Eleanor came about naturally.

Before dinner was over, he knew more of her previous history than Mrs. Bland or Miss Fanshawe could have extracted in a year's ill-bred cross-questioning; and yet he had asked nothing. He simply looked, as he felt, interested in all she said; in the new type of character she unconsciously revealed to him; in her unconventionality, so refreshing and attractive in its perfect freedom from the usual banes of so-called 'simplicity'—awkwardness and want of refinement.

Suddenly there fell a little pause, and Eleanor stopped short in the middle of a sentence. But almost immediately Sir Robert's voice began again.

'Then, if I understand you rightly, Mr. Marshall, there is actually no,' &c.

And Mrs. Bland's weak little voice piped up

again at the other end of the table with some village scandal, which 'dear Miss Chesney' would be, she was sure, 'so *grieved* to hear.'

Maurice waited till they were all fairly started afresh, and then turned to his companion.

'Pray go on with what you were saying, Mrs. Marshall; it was very interesting to me,' he said; 'I mean, about your having read so many of our standard authors for the first time in French or German, and how differently they struck you when you came to read them in the original. Dear me, how odd it seems to think of any one having read Dickens for the first time in French! Do tell me now, honestly, which you enjoyed the most—the original or the translation?'

But Eleanor did not answer immediately. Then she looked up, smiling a little, but with a slight flush on her face.

'Do you know, Mr. Chesney, I am rather ashamed of myself?' she said gently. 'It never struck me till that sudden pause came just now, that the whole of dinner-time I have done nothing but talk of myself and my own concerns. It is not very often I do so, and it is very kind of you to have listened to me; but now I think we had better talk about something else.'

Maurice looked half amused, half annoyed.

'I have no right to ask you to believe me on the strength of so very short an acquaintance,' he said; 'but truly, Mrs. Marshall, I wish you would believe that *I* have enjoyed our talk very much. It is so seldom one comes across fresh unhackneyed ideas like yours; and your life, too, has been a far from commonplace one. Don't you find Chesney desperately dull sometimes?'

'Not hitherto,' she replied; 'though I cannot answer for what I shall find it a few months hence, when—when I am really alone.'

She had already told him of the terrible trouble hanging over her, of separation from Georgie; and now, when she alluded to it so piteously, he looked away, fearful of seeing the tears which he felt sure were in her eyes. He need not have done so, however; she was not a woman to whom tears came so easily; as he found, when he had learnt to know her better. In a moment she addressed him again.

'I wonder if children do suffer very much when they first go to school,' she said; 'sensitive children, I mean. Do you remember if you did, Mr. Chesney?'

He smiled at her question, as he answered it by another.

'How do you know I was a sensitive child, Mrs. Marshall?' he said. 'However that may have been, as far as I remember, I was very jolly at school, after the first few days. I have no doubt, if that's any comfort to you, when the time comes for your little sister to go to school, it will be worse for you than for her. I am quite sure it was so in my case. Elizabeth, poor dear soul!—that is Lady Chesney, my sister-in-law—was far more miserable about the parting than I was; though I don't know that I was more ungrateful than other children.'

Eleanor looked across the table at her hostess's gentle faded face, with deep sympathy in her eyes.

'I have heard how very fond Lady Chesney has always been of you,' she said. 'It made me wish to know her long before I saw her. I was quite disappointed the first Sunday you returned here, not to see her in church.'

'Was that what you were thinking of when I saw you looking so disconsolate?' asked Maurice mischievously.

'I was wondering if Lady Chesney cared for you as much as I do for Georgie,' confessed Eleanor; 'but, you see, I couldn't quite fancy it—with you not being a little boy, but grown-up.'

Maurice looked still more amused.

'But you didn't expect to see me a little boy, did you?' he inquired. 'If so, I am very sorry for having disappointed you, but I am afraid I cannot help it.'

'You are laughing at me, Mr. Chesney,' said Eleanor; 'and do you know, I cannot bear to be laughed at? Of course I knew you were not a little boy still. Would you turn back into one if you could?'

'I don't know I am sure,' answered he more seriously; 'on the whole, I think not. I don't fancy I was a particularly happy child.'

Mrs. Marshall took quick advantage of the allusion, and led Mr. Chesney on insensibly to talk, in turn, of himself and his past life; till, when the time came for the ladies to leave the table, he discovered that his neighbour had managed to adhere to her resolution of changing the conversation, and that for the last half-hour he had been guilty of speaking of himself and his own affairs considerably more than he was in the habit of doing.

'It was a very mean revenge, Mrs. Marshall,' he said, as he made way for Eleanor to pass towards the door, which the obsequious Mr. Bland already

held open for the file of ladies. 'I had no idea you were so cunning.'

'That is a very ugly word, Mr. Chesney,' she replied, laughing. 'It was not cunning at all. Why should I not have my turn of hearing about you, as well as you about me?'

Horatia just then approaching caught the sound of the merry little laugh and unceremonious tone of voice, and by no means approved thereof.

'What an idot Maurice is!' she said to herself. 'He, who declares he can never find anything to talk about to Amethyst Berners, or any woman of our own class, to be on such familiar terms already with that Mrs. Marshall. It shows what she is. I only wish he were not going to stay here when we go up to town.'

These reflections did not add to the cordiality of Miss Chesney's manner to the young stranger, when the four ladies found themselves reduced to each other's society in the drawing-room. A very stupid half-hour ensued, and poor Eleanor mentally indorsed all the sharpest things she had ever heard said abroad about the stiffness, the *gêne*, the many unsociable barbarisms existing in English society. Lady Chesney would have liked to be all that was kind to her guest, but she was more than usually tired

that evening, and feeling additionally nervous from the thought of her impending journey, was really unfit for any exertion; so she lay on the sofa with her eyes closed—a proceeding which did not conduce to the general hilarity.

The conversation was principally carried on by Miss Chesney and her amiable friend Mrs. Bland, and related chiefly to people and things of which Mrs. Marshall had never heard. Still she was too unaccustomed to society, too unconscious, in her simple dignity, of the *possibility* of any one's intending to slight her, or assume the 'warning-off' tone towards her, that she did not feel the least indignant or annoyed, or anything worse than considerably bored. Now and then she joined in the conversation, so far as was possible for her, with some quiet little remark or cheerful observation, unconsciously proving, greatly to Miss Chesney's disgust, that she felt herself perfectly at home, unawed by the formal grandeur of her surroundings. But, O how she wished herself at home with Georgie! With the thought of her sister, she turned to Mrs. Bland, as just then there fell a little break in the conversation.

'By the bye, Mrs. Bland,' she began, 'I hope Georgie was not too late for your little people this

afternoon? She was in the church with me while I was practising, and I told her to go when the clock struck half-past four; but I was so busy playing, I did not see her set off. I hope she was not late.'

She did not really care in the least. She knew it was a matter of less than no consequence whether the child had been in time for the small Blands' nursery repast or not; but she wanted to hear the last news, as it were, of her darling. Her heart was sore at having left her even for those few hours. It had been kind, she thought, of Mrs. Bland to propose that the little girl's solitary evening should be exchanged for a sociable romp in her nursery; and she wanted to hear from the vicar's wife that she had left Georgie and her own boys and girls 'all as merry as could be,' or 'all enjoying their tea, Georgie the life of the party.' But it was not thus that Mrs. Bland replied to her inquiry. With a closer imitation of fine-ladyism than Eleanor, had she not seen it with her own eyes, could have believed the silly little woman capable of, Mrs. Bland answered with a drawl:

'I beg your pardon, Mrs. Marshall. I am afraid I can't satisfy you as to whether your little girl was in time for the nursery tea or not. I have really not

been much in the nursery lately. Now that *dear* Miss Chesney is here again, I am only too delighted to see as much of her as possible. And we have had so *much* to arrange—have we not, dear Miss Chesney? It is really too bad, after those dreary two years of your absence, to pay us *such* a flying visit!' And she turned towards Horatia, recommencing a chattering conversation, in which Mrs. Marshall was neither invited nor felt inclined to take a part.

She got up in a few minutes, and strolled to the window, looking out on to the pretty ornamental grounds on the south side of the house. She was not angry with Mrs. Bland; she hardly understood her; and yet could scarcely help laughing at her affectation.

'Poor woman! she is quite absorbed with her dear Miss Chesney,' she said to herself. 'Well, I suppose it is part of the *métier* of a parson's wife in this country. I don't mind her silliness, for I don't care for her; but I don't think I shall let Georgie go to her house any more. It is not nice of her to seem ashamed of having been kind. And what a fuss she has always made about Georgie! I don't understand why she should have changed so.'

But she did not waste much thought on Mrs.

Bland. She began thinking about Georgie. Somehow she felt uneasy about her. The little girl had said she felt tired that afternoon. Could she be going to be ill?—it was so unlike Georgie to be tired—or was it only the effect of the thunder in the air? It might be so; it probably was; but yet—but yet Nelly wished devoutly she could get a magical peep at that moment of Georgie's golden head resting peacefully in the little white bed. It was growing dark outside. It had been a dull evening, though the storm appeared to have dispersed in the neighbourhood. But if dull outside, it was duller in; and the words, 'How I wish I might run out into the garden!' escaped Eleanor, almost without her knowing she spoke.

'Why shouldn't you?' said a voice beside her, startling her by its unexpectedness. 'See, this side-window opens like a door.'

Turning round, Eleanor beheld Mr. Chesney, who with Mr. Bland had entered the long room quietly; so that she, standing at the other end, had heard no sound of approach.

'O, Mr. Chesney, is it you?' she exclaimed. 'I am so—' 'Glad you have come!' was on her lips to have added; but she stopped short; for Miss

Chesney, walking across the room in their direction, interrupted the sentence.

'What in the world are you doing, Maurice?' she exclaimed to her step-brother, who was fumbling at the window. 'You are never thinking of going out into the garden? How insane you are! Of course that door will not open. It is always kept fastened, except in the middle of summer. Do leave it alone!'

Maurice desisted at last from his vain attempt, and stood up with a rather red face; but before he had time to speak, Eleanor turned quietly to Horatia.

'It was not Mr. Chesney's fault, Miss Chesney; it was mine,' she said simply. 'I was just saying to myself how I should like to run out into the garden, and Mr. Chesney overheard me, and was so kind as to offer to open the door.'

She spoke merely as if stating a fact, with no sense of apology due or intended. Horatia surveyed her from head to foot for a moment without speaking; but she interrupted Maurice when she saw he was about to say something.

'Excuse me, Maurice,' she said, waving him aside; and then addressing Eleanor: 'I am *afraid*,

Mrs. Marshall,' she said, in a tone which Eleanor hardly understood—'I am *afraid* it is impossible to gratify your wish by having that door opened to-night. Besides, are you not forgetting the risk of taking cold when you propose to walk in the garden so late?—though certainly I see that you are to some extent prepared for any such little expeditions by your dress. I am really exceedingly sorry to disappoint you; but, you see, unfortunately we are in the habit of spending our evenings in the drawing-room;' and with an unpleasant little laugh she turned away, and walked to the other end of the room.

Eleanor stared after her rather bewilderedly; then her eyes came home, and began glancing over her dress in such a funny puzzled way, that, for all his annoyance, Maurice could hardly help bursting out laughing.

'What is the matter, Mrs. Marshall?' he said at last. 'Why do you look so perplexed? What *is* the matter?'

'Nay, Mr. Chesney,' she replied, 'it is rather I that should ask you what is the matter. You are at home. You must understand things that are naturally puzzling to a stranger. Tell me, is there any-

thing odd about my dress — anything unusual or unsuitable? You know I have hardly ever been in company in England, or indeed anywhere, where the form, the ceremony, was great; and I would not for worlds hurt any one's preju—feelings, I mean, or appear wanting in proper respect. But I thought my dress was very nice;' and again her glance wandered over the pretty rich gray silk, with its soft sweeping skirt, and bodice drawn up to the throat with white lace and blue ribbons, with an expression half critical, half approving, very amusing to see. Then she raised her eyes to Maurice's with such innocent childlike questioning, that he could not but answer gravely:

'So it is, Mrs. Marshall—very nice indeed. I see nothing odd about it, except that it is much prettier and in much better taste than one generally sees.'

'I do get my best dresses from Paris,' she replied, accepting the little compliment quite simply; 'and you know every one says French taste is better than English. I get them from Paris, because I do not know any of the London shops, and Mr. Marshall likes me to have nice things. He is so kind. And I have a friend who goes to Paris every year,

Pauline—Madame de la Vigne, I should say—who sends me my best dresses. But if my dress is pretty, Mr. Chesney, what could your sister mean—for evidently she did not like it, for some reason?'

'She is one of those people that can admire nothing out of their own groove, Mrs. Marshall—a class it would be peculiarly difficult for *you* to have any sympathy with,' he said. 'I assure you, you need not give a second thought to what she said. She could not think your dress was not pretty and suitable. All she meant was, that—that there was rather more of it, in fact, than is thought orthodox by Englishwomen to eat their dinner in. That pretty white fluffy stuff—lace, I suppose—and ribbons, Horatia would think it correct to dispense with.'

Eleanor raised her hand to her neck.

'O, the "tulle," you mean,' she said laughing, but blushing too a little. 'O, I understand quite now. But, you see, at Rochette, even at quite grand parties, no one was *obliged* to be *tout-à-fait décolletée*, except, of course, at balls. Then here, I suppose, one should dress in a regular ball-dress every evening? Ah, I see. But I do not mind. Lady Chesney' (Maurice observed she did not say *Miss* Chesney) 'will know I meant no disrespect. Besides, I have

another reason for—' But she stopped, and blushed again. Of course, she would not tell a stranger that as the disproportionately young wife of an elderly man she felt that dressing to suit her own years only would show neither good taste nor feeling.

Mr. Bland came up just then, opportunely enough, and interrupted the *tête-à-tête*.

'Well, my dear Mrs. Marshall,' he began urbanely, in his fat clergyman-of-the-parish tone, 'and how is the new voluntary getting on?' (Sir Robert, be it observed, had laid his commands on his sister not to interfere with Mrs. Marshall's afternoon performance on the organ. 'She plays a great deal better than Burton; and he's getting too old to take the whole of it,' the Baronet had observed; 'and before long there would be talk of a new organist, or assistant, or some nonsensical arrangement, whose pay, you may be sure, would not come out of Burton's pocket, or Bland's either. So just you leave well alone, Horatia. You women are so confoundedly spiteful to each other. I'm certain it's just because she's young and good-looking you have taken such a dislike to Mrs. Marshall.' Which remarks did not tend to diminish Miss Chesney's unreasonable prejudice against innocent Eleanor.) 'We are expecting great things

of you on Sunday, I assure you. I hear you have been practising most diligently this week,' continued Mr. Bland.

'Did Georgie tell you so, Mr. Bland?' said Eleanor good-humouredly. 'If so, she is a little tell-tale-tit, and I shall scold her well when I get home. It is not the voluntaries only we have been busy at: it is those new hymns; and the accompaniment of one of them is really rather difficult for any one who knows as little of the organ as I do. You won't be favoured with them for some time yet, though, Mr. Bland. I must practise them with the choir several times first.'

'Ah, yes,' said the clergyman, 'it is pretty hard work getting up a new hymn-tune, Mrs. Marshall. We are really very much indebted to you for giving so much time to it, as I hear you do. Sir Robert has expressed himself as highly gratified on the subject—yes, *highly* gratified.'

'Sir Robert is too kind,' said Eleanor, in the slightly prim manner she sometimes unconsciously assumed, usually to hide some sensation of annoyance; 'he spoke of it to me himself at dinner; and indeed, Mr. Bland, there is a great deal more said about the matter than it is worth. Georgie is a

chatterbox to tell how much I practise. It only shows I am very stupid.'

'But you must not blame Miss Georgie for betraying your secrets, my dear madam,' said the vicar sententiously. 'It was Ned Perkins who told me how busy he had been this week blowing for The Feathers lady. Miss Georgie I have not had the pleasure of seeing for some time. By the bye, my boys were lamenting her absence this evening. She was to have joined the nursery party, I believe; but as she did not make her appearance, I suppose the stormy look of the weather prevented your allowing her to venture out?'

Eleanor started violently.

'Was Georgie not at your house when you left it this evening, Mr. Bland? I sent her at half-past four.'

The vicar considered a moment.

'She was certainly not there at half-past four,' he replied; 'for it was just at that hour I looked into the nursery. However, I did not see anything more of the children from that time till I left the house; so no doubt, as you sent her off, Miss Georgie will have arrived safe enough. There is not much fear of any one being run away with in Chesney!' And he laughed at his own wit.

Just then, Sir Robert and Mr. Marshall made their appearance, and Mr. Bland turned to join them. A rubber was proposed, and lights rung for; but Eleanor stood silently by the window, staring out into the darkness.

CHAPTER V.

'NELLY, NELLY, O NELLY!'

'Then, taking the key, he went to the church. . . . What sort of a ghost do you think appeared? Why, little Two-Shoes, who, being weary, had fallen asleep in one of the pews, and was shut in all night. . . . 'It was dismal dark,' she said. I own I was a little afraid. Yet I kneeled down to say my prayers.'

The History of Goody Two-Shoes.

A LAMP was placed on a side-table near the window by which Mrs. Marshall was standing. Mr. Chesney, who had been at the other end of the room, helping to arrange the whist-party, of which he cleverly managed to avoid making one, seeing Eleanor standing solitary and apart, crossed the room again in her direction. When he addressed her, she turned from the window; and the light falling full on her face, he was startled to see that she was terribly pale.

'Is anything the matter, Mrs. Marshall?' he said hastily; 'you look as if you had seen a ghost.'

Eleanor tried to smile, but the effort was not very successful.

'It is only,' she said, 'that I am so uneasy about my sister.'

'Because she was five or ten minutes late of arriving at the Vicarage?' he said in a rallying tone. 'Indeed, Mrs. Marshall, it is quite true what Mr. Bland said: no one *could* come to harm in our peaceful little village. Were your sister a few years older, and were these the days of Sir Charles Grandison, you might think her lovely face temptation enough to some daring gallant to carry her off in a coach-and-four — though hardly in broad daylight.' And he smiled reassuringly, though thinking to himself the while that really this otherwise sensible young woman was rather exaggerated on the subject of her beautiful little sister.

'I never heard of Sir Charles Grandison,' said Mrs. Marshall meekly; 'and I daresay I am very silly. Certainly, I am quite sure Georgie would not let any one carry *her* off in a coach-and-four, or in anything, without very vehement resistance. She is a most determined little person, I assure you, Mr. Chesney.' She spoke with an evident effort at cheerfulness; but Maurice could see she was still un-

easy. She was possessed with the idea that Georgie was ill—had fainted, perhaps (though such an idea as that of fainting in connection with Georgie struck even her over-anxiety as ridiculous), and been carried into some cottage, where they did not know who she was. But of course in every cottage in Chesney they would know who she was. That idea was absurd, she owned to herself. Indeed, it was quite true, there was nothing to be anxious about in any way; and yet she could not feel comfortable. She could not get out of her head the weary look on the child's face that afternoon; and she wished she had not left her.

'I am forgetting my message, Mrs. Marshall,' said Maurice. 'My sister-in-law wants to know if you will be so very good as to give us a little music. It will be for her benefit and mine only,' he went on hastily, seeing that Eleanor was preparing to decline; 'the whist-players are adjourning to the next room, and Mrs. Bland is sure to accompany them, to sit behind Horatia and extol her playing till she nearly drives Robert mad. It is to be hoped Mr. Marshall's temper is of the long-suffering order; but his face belies him if it is not. Do come and play, Mrs. Marshall; it does poor Elizabeth so much good when she

is nervous, as she is to-night; and it does me so much good when I am in a bad temper, as *I* am to-night. And we so seldom have any one to play to us. There, now, I knew you couldn't withstand such inducements,' as Eleanor, smiling in spite of herself, began to move twards the piano.

'That is to say, I cannot withstand such an overwhelming flow of words, Mr. Chesney,' she said. 'If I knew you better, I should be inclined to tell you you were nearly as great a chatterbox as Georgie.'

'It's not my usual character, Mrs. Marshall, I assure you,' he replied; 'but if you will begin to play, I will promise to leave off talking.'

Eleanor's piano-playing was nothing very much out of the common. She had no genius for music; but she loved it sincerely, and being possessed of good taste and true feeling, her playing was very pleasant; and though it might not always satisfy, at least it never offended. It satisfied her hearers this evening, however. She chose just the soft soothing music that poor Lady Chesney's weak nerves could bear and feel refreshed by; and Mr. Chesney may be supposed to have enjoyed it, as he kept to his promise of not talking till it was over. He did more: he sat so still in his corner, that when Eleanor

left off, he forgot to jump up and thank her, till his sister-in-law roused him by inquiring if he were asleep.

'Only dreaming, not asleep,' he answered lightly; but even then he forgot to thank Mrs. Marshall for her good-nature. But Lady Chesney's gentle 'That is very sweet; it has done me a great deal of good,' was quite enough thanks to Eleanor for her little effort. Soon she began to listen anxiously for sounds of the whist-party's breaking up. The evening seemed dreadfully tedious; she did so long to go home. Mr. Chesney strolled into the next room, leaving her alone with her hostess.

'I am so sorry not to have been able to go to see you myself, Mrs. Marshall,' said Lady Chesney kindly, 'and your house. I hear you have made the old Feathers so very pretty.'

'It is very nice and comfortable; we like it very much,' answered Eleanor rather absently.

'When we return in the summer,' pursued the invalid in her gentle monotone, 'I shall hope to be able to go and see you. And your little girl—your sister, I mean; Miss Urquhart I think her name is—I am so very anxious to make her acquaintance. I hope you will bring her to see me, Mrs. Marshall.

I hear she is such a lovely little creature, and I do *so* love children!'

Eleanor began to think it would not be difficult to love Lady Chesney herself. Safe for the time from the constraint of Horatia's hard criticising presence, grateful to Eleanor for the pleasure she had given her, and attracted by her gentle manners, poor Elizabeth's tender womanly nature showed itself in its true colours; and the pleasantest part of the evening to the young stranger was the quiet half-hour's talk with her hostess—a half-hour which drew them nearer together than they suspected at the time, and which, like all sweet and natural influences, left pleasant traces behind it. To her own surprise, Eleanor found herself talking to Lady Chesney of her past life, with its simple pleasures and premature cares; of her dead mother, whose name now so rarely passed her lips; of her little sister, and her anxieties concerning her. To all of which her hostess listened with a kindly interest and genuine sympathy, which reacted healthfully on herself, by taking her thoughts for the time out of the narrow circle of self-absorption in which they usually revolved.

Soon the rubber was over, and to Eleanor's great relief—for the mention of Georgie had renewed her

eagerness to see with her own eyes that the child was all right—the little party showed signs of dispersing.

'We are walking home, thank you,' said Eleanor, when Mr. Chesney was starting forward to ring for their carriage. 'I persuaded Mr. Marshall to agree to our doing so, if it was fine; and I fancy it is so.'

'Perfectly,' replied Maurice, peeping between the venetians of the nearest window. 'A most lovely night, after all the talk of a storm. Moonlight too; I envy you your walk.'

In a few minutes, Eleanor—cloaked, hooded, and overshoed, just as she used to be in the old days at Rochette, when returning from taking tea with Madame d'Herbain, or from a *soirée musicale*, at the house of the great lady, Madame la Comtesse de Fléval—stood at the hall-door, waiting for her husband, whom at the last moment, with unusually gracious apologies to Mrs. Marshall for so doing, Sir Robert had decoyed into his study, to show him some local plan or map of some kind bearing on the grand Furseley squabble, in which every county magnate of the neighbourhood was more or less interested. Eleanor was eager to be gone; but, with her habit of unselfishness in such little matters, she stood by the

open door patiently enough, soothed in spite of herself by the calm beauty of the night.

'What an exquisite evening!' said a voice beside her; and Maurice approached from the other end of the terrace, a cigar in his hand, which he was just about to throw away, when Eleanor stopped him.

'You need not do that,' she said; 'I do not mind it, Mr. Chesney. I think I rather like it, particularly when it is moonlight.'

'What an original combination — cigars and moonlight!' exclaimed Maurice, laughing at her odd quaint way of expressing herself, and distinguishing with rather creditable quickness between the confusion of her personal pronouns. 'How do you come to associate the two, I wonder?'

Was there any other association in her mind? he thought to himself. For all her apparent simplicity and inexperience, might not this young wife have had her 'story'—unconnected with her prosaic marriage and commonplace elderly husband, towards whom her strongest feelings were evidently respect and gratitude? Visions of the conventional German student, with lank fair hair, and perpetual talk of 'Vaterland,' began to float through Maurice's mind,

and he looked at Eleanor with a slight but curious smile on his face, while he wondered *whose* cigars she had been wont to think so fragrant on moonlight nights. But the almost childish simplicity of her reply baffled him, and put to flight his half-formed conjectures.

'I really don't know,' she answered laughingly; 'I am afraid I say very silly things sometimes, Mr. Chesney. I am not at all romantic—perhaps that explains some of my stupid speeches. Moonlight is very beautiful,' she went on, looking round admiringly as she spoke, 'but to me it is always fearfully depressing. Light without warmth seems somehow a false unreal thing; and there is something comfortable and sociable about a cigar, now and then.'

'You speak so feelingly, Mrs. Marshall, I could almost fancy it was from personal experience,' said Maurice; but Eleanor shook her head, while she replied it was only personal in so far as she had benefited by the fumes of 'dear old Monsieur's' cigars, many a moonlight evening at Rochette, when they sat out in the garden of Le Doux Repos, and listened to the students' choruses in the distance.

'I don't think I agree with you as to moonlight being depressing,' observed Maurice; 'to me it is

rather dreamily exhilarating, if you can imagine such a contradictory sensation.'

They had moved out from the shelter of the door, and stood now on the terrace in front. The old house looked very picturesque in the moonlight—the half castellated style in which it was built becoming considerably more impressive in the intensified lights and shades now sharply defined, than in the full rounding daylight, when the anomalies and anachronisms of its architecture were the despair of all connoisseurs, real or fancied, in the great art of stone and mortar.

'It's a queer old place,' exclaimed Maurice, facing round to look at the Court as he spoke; 'but, for all that, no place can ever be like it to me. It's strange how associations cling to one. Whenever I see this house in the moonlight, I remember my intense boyish sympathy with Walter Scott, in what he tells us of the fascination the first verse of the old ballad of "Cumnor Hall" had for him. Do you remember—

> "The dews of summer night did fall,
> The moon, sweet regent of the sky,
> Silver'd the walls of Cumnor Hall,
> And many an oak that grew thereby."

I only remember that verse; I don't care a bit for

the rest of the ballad, though no doubt we owe *Kenilworth* to it.'

'I haven't read *Kenilworth*,' said Mrs. Marshall penitently, as if she had been found guilty of a crime. 'I have only read *Le Talisman*, and one or two others of Scott's in French.'

'I can lend you any of them you like,' said Mr. Chesney; 'though you must know young ladies of the day would pronounce them "dreadfully old-fashioned." It is so nice to come across some one who hasn't read everything.'

'Ah, but it would be a better description of me to say I hadn't read *anything*,' she replied. 'But I shall be very glad of any books you can lend me, Mr. Chesney; I see so few. And I am quite ready to begin with the "dreadfully old-fashioned" ones, *not* being a young lady of the day. But what a long time Mr. Marshall is! It must be half an hour since he went off with Sir Robert "for a single moment."'

'Just ten minutes since I came upon you,' said Maurice, consulting his watch by the moonlight. 'It's very evident I cannot hope to make the time pass quickly by my powers of entertainment! But really it's too bad. Do let me go and hurry Mr. Marshall.'

'No, thank you; I think not,' answered Eleanor hesitatingly. 'Mr. Marshall knows I am generally patient; only to-night I am fidgety. Let us wait other five minutes, any way; that will only be a quarter of an hour, after all.'

They stood in silence for some moments—Mrs. Marshall wishing she might run home alone; Maurice mentally deciding that, for all his kindliness of manner, Mr. Marshall treated this young wife of his pretty cavalierly. Suddenly Eleanor started violently; in her agitation she seized her companion's arm, and he saw that her face was as pale as death.

'Did you hear that?' she gasped at last. 'Did you hear that cry?'

He thought she was going out of her mind.

'No,' he answered; 'I heard nothing. I am sure there was nothing. It can only have been your fancy, Mrs. Marshall, I assure you. What did you think you heard?'

He spoke soothingly, but it made little, if any, impression on her.

'I heard something cry, "Nelly, Nelly, O Nelly!"' she replied, shivering as she spoke; 'and the voice sounded like Georgie's, only a very long way off. O, Mr. Chesney, *do* let me go!' for uncon-

sciously he had caught hold of her cloak, as she appeared on the point of rushing off, he knew not whither.

'But who is "Nelly"? I don't understand,' he asked bewilderedly.

'*I* am Nelly, of course,' she exclaimed, giving a little shake in her impatience; 'she always calls me Nelly, and she is calling me now. Never mind if you don't understand. I don't understand either, but I know something dreadful has happened to her. I have known it all the evening. You are very cruel and wicked to keep me. Let me go, Mr. Chesney; *do* let me go.'

But by this time Maurice had collected his wits.

'No, Mrs. Marshall,' he said deliberately, 'I won't let you go till you are calm, and listen to me;' —she stood quiet immediately;—'that is right. Now listen. There is no use startling other people about what is very likely only a fancy of yours, so I will just go in and tell Mr. Marshall quietly you have walked on. People would only make fun of you if you said you had heard a cry like that. But you will be best satisfied by seeing for yourself. Look now, if you take that path to the right, and go straight along till you come to a little gate, which

you must pass through into the church path, as we call it, you will be home in half the time you would by the road. You are sure you understand the way?'

'Yes, thank you,' she said quietly, though in a fever of impatience to be off. 'I quite understand, and I shall run all the way. Please say whatever you like to Mr. Marshall before Sir Robert. I can explain it afterwards;' and in an instant she was off.

She was a good runner—'for a girl,' as doubtless her brothers, had she possessed any, would have qualified the commendation. But just now she was too excited to manage her strength well, she exhausted herself by the rate at which she set off; and long before she reached the little gate of which Mr. Chesney had told her, the furious beating of her heart, the dreadfully painful burning sensation in her throat, warned her she was very nearly 'beat.' The path was very dark; even the insidious moonbeams could not pierce their way through the thick interlacing of the boughs overhead; at any other time, to confess the ignominious truth, poor Nelly would have been frightened out of her wits. As it was, the first overwhelming excitement gradually dying away, with the consciousness of her failing powers, she began to realise her situation with some uneasi-

ness. She slackened her pace a little, and the buzzing in her ears, the pulses in her head, grew slightly fainter; when, horror of horrors! far away behind her, down there along the dark path, she distinguished a quickly advancing footstep. On it came, faster and faster, every moment growing firmer and more distinct; the path was so narrow, the bushes grew so thick and close at each side, she could not hope to shrink back and let her pursuer pass by without perceiving her. What should she do? All sorts of wild absurdities rushed into her imagination with the inconceivable swiftness with which we are told the events of past life crowd themselves before the mind's eye of a drowning man. At that moment there was not a monster of all Monsieur Montluc's wildest legends, from the were-wolf of the Pyrenees to the more hideous vampire of the Engadin, whose appearance would have done more than realise poor Eleanor's half-delirious anticipations of horror. She tried to run again, but the spasmodic effort quickly degenerated into a piteous sort of totter; she heard the footsteps now *quite* close upon her, and was just about throwing herself recklessly into the thorn-bushes at the side of the path, when the commonplace sound of her own name caught her ears.

'Mrs. Marshall,' exclaimed the monster, whose form it was almost too dark for her to distinguish, 'for pity's sake stop a moment! What a race you have given me!'

'O, Mr. Chesney,' she ejaculated, as soon as she could steady her voice sufficiently to render her words intelligible, 'how *dreadfully* you have frightened me! I don't know what I didn't think you were when I heard you coming after me along that dreadful dark path.'

'Frightened you?' he repeated. 'I am sure I am very sorry;' but a little mortification might have been perceived in his tone.—'Just like a woman,' he said to himself, 'abusing me for frightening her, instead of thanking me for running all this way like a madman in her service! That's what comes of meddling in other people's business!—But you might have known it could be no one but me, Mrs. Marshall,' he continued aloud. 'I should have followed you sooner; but Mr. Marshall and my brother were so engrossed with their maps, I couldn't get them to listen to me. It's my opinion, now they've got you off their mind, they won't leave that den of Robert's till midnight. But I'm walking too fast, Mrs. Marshall. Dear me, how breathless you are! Were

you so very frightened really, or did you run very fast?'

'Both,' she answered. 'Of course, I should not have been frightened, had I known you were coming after me; but I had no idea you intended it; and being frightened about Georgie already made me silly, I suppose.'

'But how *could* you think I would let you go all the way home alone?' he persisted. 'Of course, I told Mr. Marshall, if he would allow me, I would see you safe home, as you were tired of waiting, but unwilling to interrupt him. He thinks you started under my escort from the door. Besides, did you not give me credit for some natural anxiety to know if your sister is really in any trouble? A nice opinion you must have formed of me!' he concluded satirically.

'No, no; not that at all,' remonstrated Eleanor; 'but I was in such a hurry to set off, I never thought about you at all.' ('Thank you,' said Mr. Chesney, in an inaudible whisper, however.) 'Besides,' she went on, 'nobody would believe that my hearing Georgie call me was not a ridiculous fancy. Now I am getting cool about it, I am beginning to think so myself. I have no doubt I shall find her safe asleep

at home. I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Chesney, for not letting me make myself ridiculous about it to any one else; and please don't tell any one. There are some things, whether they are fancies or not, that I don't like to be made a joke of.'

'You told me to-night you didn't like being laughed at,' he replied; 'though who does, I wonder? However, I *don't* laugh at people for the sort of thing you mean—superstitions, they are generally called, I suppose. A very easy term to class together under all the things we cannot understand! I see you are very superstitious, Mrs. Marshall; but we'll have a talk about that at some other less witching time. In the mean time, I wish you would tell me exactly what your sister was about this afternoon, and what reason you have to be uneasy about her. Talking won't make us get over the ground slower. You couldn't keep up a faster pace than this all the way to The Feathers. Besides, I want to hear all you can tell me. It may be wasting time to go to look for her at home.'

So Eleanor told him all the particulars: Georgie's complaining of being tired; their expedition to the church, and the child's establishment on the bench with her fairy-tales to wait for the half-hour strik-

ing; her non-appearance at the Blands', or back again at home before her sister left for the Court; and last, though evidently far from least in Mrs. Marshall's estimation, the truly womanly and certainly unanswerable argument of her own instinctive conviction throughout the evening, that something was wrong with the little girl.

Before this they had emerged from the darkness of the closely-planted shrubbery, and were now hastening along the church path, where the less thickly growing trees allowed the moonlight to show them their way almost as clearly as by day. Mr. Chesney stopped short for a moment when Eleanor left off speaking, and turned round so as to face her. His pale face looked almost ghastly in the cold blue light, and his dark hair and eyebrows increased the peculiar appearance. At first Mrs. Marshall in her over-excitement imagined something had startled him; some sound, perhaps, had reached his ears which hers had failed to catch.

'What is it?' she whispered faintly; but, glancing at him again, she saw to her surprise that he was looking more amused than distressed; and her second inquiry, 'What are you laughing at?' was not particularly amiable in tone.

'I beg your pardon, I'm not laughing,' he said; 'only the idea that has struck me is so queer; and I can't think why it didn't occur to you before. The chances are, I still say, that the child turned up at the Blands' a little later than the proper time; but if not, her disappearance is no mystery. Don't you see, Mrs. Marshall, what must have become of her? You must have deliberately locked her up in the church.'

'Locked her up in the church!' repeated Eleanor, as if she could not take in the sense of the words. 'But—but, Mr. Chesney, she would not have let me. Besides, I should have seen her. I passed the bench she was sitting on, as I came out.'

'But supposing she was tired, and fell asleep? There was thunder in the air,' said Maurice. 'She may have left that bench for one of the more comfortable cushioned pews; and if she was fast asleep she would never hear you come out.'

Eleanor gave a little scream, and set off running again at a rate she could not possibly keep up for many minutes. But Mr. Chesney soon overtook her.

'Don't hurry so,' he remonstrated; 'it will gain no time in the end. Besides, the thing is now clear;

you need not be uneasy. We are sure to find her safe and sound—asleep still, I daresay.'

'O, no; the cold will have wakened her, and she will be half dead with terror,' cried Eleanor in an agony.

'Is she a very nervous child?' asked Mr. Chesney.

'Dreadfully, about some things,' answered Eleanor. 'She has heard so many wild stories—all manner of legends and ballads. They have a fascination for her. I can't keep her from them in the daytime; and at night they terrify her. She got hold of Bürger's *Lenore* the other day in one of my German books, and had learnt ever so much of it by heart before I could get it from her.'

'Poor little soul! Rather a ghastly companion for a night in a church. However, she'll soon be all right now,' said Maurice kindly and cheerfully, though not without some inward misgiving on the subject, and considerable hesitation as to whether, after all, there might not be something to be said in favour of Mr. Marshall's cruel determination to send this precocious little damsel to school. 'We'll go first to the church, if you like, Mrs. Marshall,' he said in a few minutes. 'We're close to it now; and it's on our way. We can listen at the door, and call

through to her if we hear her moving. There is a key at your house, I think you said? Here; this way, please.'

In a few moments more they found themselves at the little side-door by which Eleanor had entered that afternoon. They listened in breathless silence; put their ears to the key-hole. Not a sound was to be heard.

'Shall I call out to her?' asked Eleanor, glancing up anxiously in her companion's face.

'Not yet, I think,' he replied. 'If she is asleep, it would be cruel to wake her with a start like that. Besides, she *may* not be here.'

'I am sure she is; I feel she is,' cried Eleanor excitedly. 'O, if only I had the key!'

'I can fetch it very quickly, if you don't mind waiting here alone a few minutes,' said Maurice. 'I can jump the hedge, and be at The Feathers in no time. Of course, if she is safe at home' ('But she is *not*,' exclaimed Eleanor), 'I will run back and tell you,' he went on, without noticing the interruption. 'I am only afraid of your getting another fright;' and instinctively he glanced round at the churchyard in which they were standing, with its many graves, old and new; the tombstones—some flat, some up-

right—taking unearthly grotesque forms in the distorting moonlight.

'No—O, no,' she exclaimed; 'I am never afraid of dead people. I like churchyards. Only go; do go!'

He obeyed her.

'What a queer mixture you are!' he said to himself, mentally apostrophising the lawyer's young wife. 'Such a union of womanliness and childishness, common sense and superstition, bravery and timidity, it has never been my fate to come across. And she is clever too, intelligent and original, though charmingly uneducated, in the orthodox English acceptation of the word. That poor child! I trust devoutly she is all right. It is to be hoped she shares the last peculiar taste her sister expressed to me.'

All this time he was running at full speed; and it took him, as he had said, but a very few minutes to reach The Feathers.

The minutes, however, few as they were, were as hours to poor Nelly at her vigil. At first she shrank from leaving the little door, imagining, with the unreasoning disregard of time or space, of moments of strong excitement, that every tiny sound she heard, every rustle among the trees, every flap of a branch

against the windows, was Maurice already returning. Then she began to remember that, for some minutes at least, his reappearance was simply impossible. So, a new idea striking her, she crept round the building to the main door at the other end, its principal entrance. Here she listened again, her ear to the keyhole, with the utmost attention. At first she heard nothing; but at last a faint, a very faint, rustle caught her hearing; then another slight sound, as of some one slowly moving, followed by a sort of faintly drawn-out sigh, sounding to Eleanor's imagination almost like the words, 'O dear, O dear!' She could no longer restrain herself. Putting her lips to the keyhole, she called through, not loudly, but as clearly as she could, 'Georgie, Georgie dear, are you there? Georgie dear, speak!' But no answer came. The silence appeared more intense than before. This was the worst moment of all for Eleanor. It is hard to say what she would not have done, how she might not have injured herself in vain attempts to break open with her puny strength the great oaken iron-studded door—which before now had defied the blows of many a mailed hand, the bludgeons, on one occasion, of a Woldshire 'Jacquerie'—had the crisis not fortunately just then arrived, in the person of Mr.

Chesney, the key, the precious key, in one hand, a brandy-flask in the other!

'Do you know, Mrs. Marshall,' he exclaimed, perceiving her while still at some yards' distance, 'you never told me where to find the key? The servants, of course, hadn't a notion where to look; but I, having fortunately some experience of ladies, suggested the pockets of the dress or jacket you wore to-day. And there it was—to be sure, it is not a very big key—safe and sound!' He spoke cheerfully, but evidently had heard no news of the child at The Feathers. Mrs. Marshall had not expected any; but still her heart sank, if possible, lower within her.

They hastened round to the side-door. A moment's fumbling with the lock, and the door was opened. Eleanor darted forward.

'Stop a moment,' said Mr. Chesney; 'you can see nothing.' For it was quite dark inside the building; only at one end, near the chancel, the moonbeams entered in, a wide strip of light, which but rendered the surrounding darkness more oppressive. By this time Maurice had struck a match, and produced an end of that necessary but unsavoury article of household use known as 'dips,' which he had purloined from Betsey during his

unseasonable incursion into her domains. The 'dip,' poor thing, did its best, but a very miserable, fluttering, sputtering best it was; or else Mr. Chesney, holding the nasty greasy thing in his hand, guiltless of candlestick, the tallow running down on to his coat-sleeve, did not understand the art of making it 'throw its beams' to a distance, like its long ago immortalised ancestor.

Still it gave *some* light, but to very little purpose. No Georgie was forthcoming. At last whispered Mr. Chesney:

'Mrs. Marshall, you had better speak to her. She *must* be somewhere in one of the pews; and the noise of the door opening is sure to have wakened her.'

So Eleanor called out again:

'Georgie dear, Georgie, where are you? Do come, dear! It is I, Nelly, come to take you home. Come to me, darling!'

Her voice quivered and faltered a little with the last few words. She was growing terribly afraid of what was to be the end of the poor child's adventure. But her suspense was nearly over. A rustling was heard in a pew not far from where they stood; the door was pushed warily open; a tangled head and

pitiful half-terrified eyes peeped out. The candle, poor as it was, gave light enough to reassure the child, half-crazed with her many hours of lonely terror, that here was no mocking spectre, but her own dear, warm, loving, flesh-and-blood Nelly, standing with outstretched arms, and tears running down her face, at the sight of the dishevelled little figure, and the thought of what it had suffered. Another instant, and the two were hugging each other in ecstasy—little disjointed sentences escaping them: 'O, Nelly, I thought I should die!' And 'O, my darling, it was all my carelessness! Fancy me locking you in!' And 'O, how cold and hungry you must be!' And '*Please*, Nelly, never go out to dinner again!'

The little scene, tragi-comic as it was, was really touching; and Maurice left the sisters to coo over each other uninterruptedly for a few minutes, without reminding them of his presence, of which they were evidently in utter unconsciousness. Georgie was a pitiable little object. The clean white frock, in which she had been attired in anticipation of her evening dissipation at the Vicarage, though fortunately pretty stout in material, had nevertheless attained that indescribably deplorable condition of limpness and flab-

biness peculiar to the white frocks of half-grown little girls at the conclusion of a day's pleasuring; her flapping leghorn hat still dangled at her back, all crushed and dislocated-looking, its pretty blue ribbons a dejected wisp. Her hair was in a terrible state—a dusty mop of confusion; her poor little face, from which all the pretty rosy colour had departed, was streaked with dirty marks off the fusty old cushions and carpets where she had made her bed. Yet in Eleanor's eyes she had never looked so charming. She kissed her again and again, and held her in her arms as if she would never let her go.

'Why did you not answer when I called through the door to you about a quarter of an hour ago, dear?' she asked the child. 'Were you asleep?'

'O no!' answered Georgie; 'I have not been asleep *all* the time, only just at the first. The clock struck seven soon after I woke, and I have been awake ever since. O, it has been *so* horrible!' She shuddered a little. 'I heard the thunder, and I watched it grow dark; and I thought of such *dreadful* things. I called you so loud; but of course you could not hear. And I thought I would have to stay here till Sunday, and then I should be dead. I heard

you call me at the door; but my head had got so funny—I thought perhaps it wasn't you, but one of those horrible creatures that eat children, and that it was pretending to be you, to get hold of me. Your voice sounded so queer through the door. O, Nelly, it was so horrible! Do take me home, and don't leave me!'

Just then, for the first time, she caught sight of Mr. Chesney, and started violently.

'Who is that?' she exclaimed, clinging more closely to her sister. 'O, Nelly, who is that?'

'It is Mr. Chesney, dear,' said Eleanor, herself recalled to the remembrance of his presence; 'he has been so kind! He ran for the key, and helped me to come here quickly. I don't know when I should have got here, but for him.'

Notwithstanding present discomfort, little Georgie's good-breeding asserted itself. She turned to Maurice; and looking up in his face with her wistful blue eyes, held out her very dirty little hand.

'Thank you, Mr. Chesney; it was very good of you to come and look for me.—But O, Nelly' (turning again to her sister), 'I do so wish I were in bed!'

'Yes, that is certainly the first thing to be thought

of,' said Maurice cheerfully. 'Let's see, how can we best manage it?—Will your sister let me carry her?' he asked of Eleanor.

Poor Georgie was far too worn-out to object to any arrangement of the kind, however vehemently she might at another time have resented such a lowering of her dignity. Maurice took off the light overcoat he had put on for his evening stroll round the terrace, little foreseeing how it was to extend, and wrapped it carefully round her. Carrying the child, and followed by Eleanor, he soon reached The Feathers in safety, where Mr. Marshall had not yet arrived. Georgie was consigned to the sympathising Betsey, whose slow wits had only just begun to take in the fact, that 'Miss Georgie were staying very late at her tea-party,' when she was startled by the apparition of Mr. Chesney demanding the church-key. Eleanor remained a moment behind her sister to speak to Maurice, and bid him good-night.

'I have not thanked you at all, Mr. Chesney, for your great kindness,' she said; 'and I know I was very rude and ill-tempered to you. Pray, forgive it; and pray, believe me, I don't thank you, because I *can't*. But I shall never, never forget it.'

Her voice was low; and to his surprise, when she

looked up, he saw by the light of the lamp, that but half lit up the darkness of the old oak-panelled hall where they were standing, that her eyes were full of tears.

'You think too much of it—you do, indeed, Mrs. Marshall,' he said kindly; 'the little I did to help you was a mere act of common humanity.'

'Ah, yes, you may like to say so,' she persisted; 'but I have lived long enough in the world to know that there are very different ways of showing what you call "common humanity." I will thank you all the more in my heart, though I see you would rather I did not say any more. And Mr. Marshall,' she continued, as if recollecting a proper little form—'he too will thank you very much when I tell him of it.'

'But I would not say *much* about it to any one,' suggested Maurice. 'You can easily tell that old servant of yours—the only one up—to say very little about it; for the sooner it is allowed to die out of the poor child's head, the better. Treat it as a trifle, as much as you can. And—and—this village is a stupid gossiping little place; the affair might be exaggerated, and made a sort of good joke of, which I know you would *particularly* dislike. *I* shall not mention it. My people all go up to town to-morrow—a day sooner

than they intended; so nothing need be heard of it at the Court.'

'Thank you,' said Eleanor, looking considerably relieved. 'Yes; I should much rather not have it talked about; and I will try to prevent its leaving any painful impression on Georgie's mind. And I will not say *very* much about it to Mr. Marshall either. Not that I am afraid of his scolding *me*,' she added laughingly; 'he is far too kind to me. But he might trace it somehow to Georgie's heedlessness —he thinks her so heedless—and I could not bear her to be blamed when she has suffered so, and when it was all my fault. But though I may seem to make light of it, Mr. Chesney, you will always know how very, very much I thank you. Will you not?' And again she looked up in his face, with a shadow of not far distant tears in her eyes.

'I shall know you thank me far *too* much,' he answered lightly. 'You must get rid of that disproportionately-large capacity of gratitude of yours, Mrs. Marshall, or I fear you will be sadly taken in some time or other.'

'But even that would be better than being ungrateful, would it not?' she asked softly.

He did not reply, and turned to go, with a cordial

good-night. 'And O, by the bye,' he added, 'may I call in a day or two to see how your sister is after her fright?'

'Of course you may. How funny of you to ask me!' she answered, laughing.

CHAPTER VI.

GEORGIE'S EARLY STRAWBERRIES.

'She is pretty to walk with,
And witty to talk with,
And pleasant, too, to think on.'

SIR J. SUCKLING.

MR. MARSHALL did not appear very greatly impressed by Eleanor's account of Georgie's adventure. He said it was well it had turned out no worse, warned them to be more careful in future, and cordially approved of 'young Chesney's good-natured behaviour.'

'Very pleasant people, the whole family,' he pronounced them; and Eleanor, glad to see him pleased, expressed no dissent from his favourable opinion, but mentally rejoiced that, for at least some months to come, she was safe from any danger of a second invitation to the Court, much as she felt drawn to poor Lady Chesney herself.

Georgie's nerves suffered less from her unpleasant experience than Eleanor had feared might be the case. For a few days she looked paler than usual, started at any sudden sound, and evidently shrank from being left alone; but gradually, thanks to judicious treatment, these symptoms began to disappear, leaving no traces of farther damage.

The only event of any importance in the neighbourhood in the next few days was the whole of the little Blands taking the measles; a catastrophe which went some way towards reconciling Mrs. Marshall to the remembrance of her cruelty in having locked Miss Georgie up in the church.

'It isn't so bad as if you had caught the measles, is it, Georgie?' But the child looked doubtful. Having no personal knowledge of what it was to be ill, she was by no means sure the sensation might not be an agreeable novelty, and she envied Charlie and Tommy Bland the nice jellies and other delicacies, which their mamma was not above accepting for their benefit from The Feathers kitchen, once the sturdy little urchins were on the road to convalescence.

Nelly's kind heart, incapable of resenting anything so absurdly small as Mrs. Bland's silliness, really pitied the poor little woman, now in a state of

abject distress, and so genuinely grateful for Mrs. Marshall's kindness, that during two interviews she quite forgot to talk about 'dear Miss Chesney' at all.

Eleanor was returning from a visit of inquiry for the little Blands one afternoon, a few days after the commencement of their illness, when, not far from her own gate, she was overtaken by Mr. Chesney. He had a large parcel in his hand.

'I am so glad to see you again at last, Mrs. Marshall,' he said cordially. 'I really thought I was never to have a chance of availing myself of—'

'Please don't say all that so formally, Mr. Chesney,' interrupted Eleanor. 'I have just been having a *tête-à-tête* of a quarter of an hour with Mr. Bland, and—' here she stopped abruptly.

'*Pray* don't say I talk like him,' entreated Maurice, 'though I know that was what you were going to say. He has about a dozen of those terrible little phrases — "availing myself of your kind permission," is just like him, I confess. But what am I to say? That I wanted to call at The Feathers, and couldn't?'

'Yes,' said Eleanor, 'that is much nicer. It suits the English language and English people to be abrupt rather than too much the other way.'

'I'll try and remember your taste in future,' answered Maurice. 'Now, pray, tell me how your sister is. I really did want to call and ask, for I couldn't get her poor little face out of my head for ever so long. But I've only just got home again. I had to take my sisters up to town, after all. Robert was detained here till yesterday, and Horatia wouldn't put off going. And hard work I had to get back again! O, what a blessing it is to breathe country air! Do you hate town, Mrs. Marshall, I wonder?'

'I don't know anything about it,' she replied simply; 'not in your sense, that is to say. I think I should like a regular country-cousin visit very much. I want to see Madame Tussaud's, and the Zoological-gardens, and the top of St. Paul's, and the Queen, and all the great people, and—and—' she stopped to take breath, and looked up in Maurice's face with a mischievous laugh in her eyes.

'Are you chaffing me, Mrs. Marshall?' he asked in some perplexity.

'I don't know what that means,' she answered; 'if it means joking, I wasn't joking at all. I don't very often joke about anything,' she went on, gravely enough. 'But how queer it is, what an utterly different world I have lived in from all the people you

must know! I feel far less at home with people in England than I did abroad. However, we may have some tastes in common, I suppose. I certainly agree with you in thinking the country most beautiful and delightful just now. Georgie and I almost live out of doors. I hope the rain will keep off now for a long time. We had enough of it last month, and I do so want to have a particularly beautiful summer.'

'Why this summer particularly?' he asked; but before she could answer, he went on, 'But you have not told me yet if your little sister was any the worse for her fright.'

'I would have told you before, but you asked other questions in the middle,' she said quietly. 'No, I do not think she is any the worse for it—not now, at least. She was not quite herself for a few days; but I avoided saying much about it, and I think the impression is wearing off.'

'I am very glad of it,' he said kindly. 'You are very wise to keep so sensitive a child a great deal out of doors.'

'Yes,' she agreed; 'it is for her sake I want to have a fine summer. We are *so* happy together out of doors, and I want her to be very strong before she goes to school. Not that she is delicate—O dear no,

not the very least; but school will try her more, I fear—'

She stopped; for here the subject of their conversation came flying out to meet them—a picture of health and beauty; a very different little person from the last time Mr. Chesney had seen her.

'O, Nelly,' she exclaimed, 'do come straight into the garden! I have got tea all ready under the big tree—so lovely; and there are six strawberries ready—six, Nelly, quite ripe, out of the frame. Three for you and three for me, and—'

'How many for me, Miss Georgie?' said Mr. Chesney. 'I am exceedingly fond of early strawberries. Will you not invite me to have tea under the big tree too?'

Georgie looked at him dubiously. She was not quite sure if he was laughing at her or not. But a warning 'Georgie!' from her sister had its effect.

'Yes,' said the child, 'I can run in and fetch another cup out for you, Mr. Chesney, if you like. I did not mean to be rude. You may have two strawberries—there will be two each then; and they are not very little ones. But will you please not call me "Miss Georgie"?'

'What shall I say, then?' he asked gravely.

'My name is Miss Urquhart,' she replied with dignity; 'but as you were so kind the other night, I don't mind if you say "Georgie."'

'Thank you,' he said; 'you are very good.'

Eleanor said nothing, though she looked amused. They crossed through the house into the garden, where Georgie's refection was awaiting them. She did the honours with great gusto.

'How lovely this old place is, thanks to your care!' said Maurice, looking round with much satisfaction.

'It's very nice,' said Eleanor; 'in summer one could not wish for anything nicer. But you must not give me much credit for it. I am very stupid about gardening. I can only enjoy the results of other people's labour.'

'That's something,' returned Maurice. 'It isn't everybody that can enjoy a garden really. But what do you do, then, these fine days, when you are so much out of doors, if you don't garden with your own hands?'

'O, we are not always here,' answered Eleanor; 'we go very long walks sometimes—five or six miles off. We have walked to the Swirl falls twice this year already.'

'And when it's fine, I do my lessons out of doors,' put in Georgie, who had returned with a third tea-cup; 'and very often we sit up in the tree, reading stories all the afternon.'

'Up in the tree?' he repeated inquiringly.

'Yes, up there. Don't you see the seat?' replied the child, with a little upward movement of her head in the direction she wished to point out. 'It's a beautiful place for stories, though not so good for lessons. Nelly won't let me learn there now: there are too many things to take away my attention.'

'So I could fancy,' observed Mr. Chesney. 'But talking of stories reminds me, Mrs. Marshall, I have brought you some of the dreadfully old-fashioned ones you were speaking about the other evening. There are a whole lot of Sir Walter's,' he went on, beginning to undo his parcel; 'I didn't know which you had read, so pray take any you like; and there's any quantity up in the library when you want them. And now and then I can bring you some less old-fashioned literature when my box comes down from town, if you condescend to anything so modern.'

'Don't laugh at me,' said Eleanor, though her eyes looked very pleased; 'you know I told you I had read *nothing*. Everything is sure to be fresh

and interesting to me. It is exceedingly good of you to have remembered it. You don't know what pleasure you will give me; I wish I could return it in any way,' she went on. 'By the bye, I have a good many German books. I should be *so* glad if among them there were any you cared to read.'

'There are pretty sure to be,' answered Maurice heartily; and indeed, had he been less interested in German literature than he truly was, he could hardly have resisted the impulsive wish to gratify his young hostess by availing himself of her offer. 'I haven't read half the German books in the original that I really *must*, and I have a capital leisure time now for taking them up. But I am not a first-rate German scholar, by any means. If I may come to you now and then for assistance at any *very* tough passage—'

'I should be delighted to help you,' interrupted Mrs. Marshall eagerly. 'It would be so nice to find anything I have learnt of use to anybody. Shall I show you my German books? They are all together in one side of the bookcase. Come and see them.' And she was starting up to lead the way, when the sound of wheels stopping at the front of the house caught her ears.

'Ah, that is Mr. Marshall,' she said brightly. 'I am glad he has come home a little earlier than usual. He will be pleased to see you, Mr. Chesney.' And almost as she spoke the lawyer made his appearance at the glass-door.

'How do you do, Mr. Chesney?' he said, cordially though rather pompously. 'I am very glad to see you, and to have an opportunity of thanking you for your kindness to my wife and sister-in-law the other evening in that rather awkward little adventure of theirs. I assure you, my dear sir, we feel very much indebted to you, very much so indeed.'

At all times Maurice had the true Englishman's dislike to being thanked, but just now he felt Mr. Marshall's heavy acknowledgment to be peculiarly unpalatable. He did not want the lawyer's thanks; nothing had been farther from his mind than any thought of being of service to *him*, in the little he was able to do for poor Eleanor in her distress. Somehow, too, he had never till this moment fully realised the fact that Mr. Marshall was Mrs. Marshall's husband; that he had all the right the law could give him to speak of that graceful, refined girlish creature, with a great mouthful of burly pomposity, as 'my wife.' The situation irritated Mr. Chesney to a ridi-

culously unreasonable extent; the sight of Eleanor standing there beside her husband jarred upon his taste, his sense of the fitness of things. All the more, perhaps, because the young woman herself appeared so perfectly unconscious of the glaring, obtrusive incongruity; so serenely satisfied that everything was just exactly as it should be. So poor Mr. Marshall's little speech of acknowledgment was not received as graciously as it deserved.

'I beg you not to say anything about it, Mr. Marshall,' he replied. 'I feel it a very poor compliment to myself, that such an absurdly trifling service should be thought deserving of any thanks at all. If it were not abominably conceited to suppose you have ever heard me discussed, I could not but infer I bore a nice character in the neighbourhood for surliness and boorishness in a general way, for you to think such a trifle, a mere piece of common humanity'—here, in spite of himself, a slight smile broke over his face, as he caught Eleanor's glance—'worth noticing.'

The tone of his voice was lost on his host, who was beginning some ponderous matter-of-fact refutation of the back-handed compliment to himself Mr. Chesney had hinted at, when Eleanor interrupted

him. Her quick perception had discerned actual annoyance beneath the slight affectation of the young man's speech, and though she hardly understood the cause, she lost no time in endeavouring to smooth matters.

'No, Mr. Marshall,' she said playfully, 'you are not to gratify Mr. Chesney's curiosity by telling him what we did or did not hear of him before we had an opportunity of judging for ourselves. Let us talk of something else, quick, this very minute. But, in the first place, Georgie, you must run for another cup. There is some very good tea still, Mr. Marshall; you will have a cup, won't you?' And so she succeeded in diverting her husband's attention, shocking him a little, not unintentionally perhaps, by her very free-and-easy way of treating so awful a personage as the heir-presumptive to all the honours and grandeurs and dignities of Chesney Court and its belongings. But Maurice did not come off quite scot-free.

'I am rather disappointed in you, Mr. Chesney,' she said, in a voice that reached his ear alone. 'I did not think that you were *quite* such a John Bull as to get surly—to use your own word—when any one thanks you. It was quite right of Mr. Marshall

to thank you as he did. Please don't look so disagreeable about it.'

The smile with which Maurice silently deprecated her little reproach was sweet enough to earn forgiveness before it was asked. He had the gift of smiling; though, to do him justice, he knew nothing about it. And Nelly, poor child, had the gift—or weakness, perhaps we should call it—of finding it very difficult indeed to feel vexed with any one she liked, for more than five minutes at a time. So they were looking and feeling perfectly amiable and mutually well-disposed when Georgie returned with a cup and saucer for her guardian—thanks to which attention the poor man was decoyed into departing from his usual habits to the extent of drinking tea before dinner, and thereby considerably blunting the edge of his appetite.

Mr. Chesney, being determined to efface from his hostess's mind all remembrance of the 'surliness' of which she had accused him, exerted himself to be agreeable to Mr. Marshall, in which he did not find it difficult to succeed. Insensibly, however, the conversation turned on subjects in which Eleanor had little interest; and at last, Mr. Chesney's books lying in tempting proximity, she took one up, and before

she knew where she was, had grown so absorbed in its contents, that twice, nay three times, her husband had addressed her by name before she was aware he was speaking to her. Then suddenly she started up, looking not a little ashamed of herself, her face crimsoning all over when she caught Maurice's eyes fixed on her with an expression of great amusement.

'Eleanor, my dear,' Mr. Marshall was saying in a slightly reproving tone—'Eleanor, my dear, your book must be extraordinarily interesting. Do you not see, my dear, Mr. Chesney is waiting to bid you good-evening.'

'I am very sorry—I beg your pardon,' she said hurriedly; 'but it is your own fault, Mr. Chesney, for lending me such books. O, dear!'

'I am very sorry for interrupting you, Mrs. Marshall,' said Maurice apologetically. 'How *very* matter-of-fact you must be to find interest in these poor old books! I remember you said so of yourself the other evening. I must congratulate you on your just estimate of yourself.'

Mr. Marshall looked amused, but rather puzzled. Still more so when Eleanor looked up defiantly, and said smilingly:

'Please remember another thing, Mr. Chesney.

I don't like to be laughed at, and I don't like satirical people. It is not every day one sees *Ivanhoe* for the first time.'

Maurice's manner changed instantly.

'Laugh at you, Mrs. Marshall!' he exclaimed; 'pray do not think I would be so impertinent, or so—so presumptuous. Far from laughing at your absorption, indeed you don't know how unspeakably I think you are to be envied.—Don't you agree with me, sir,' he added, turning with quick tact to draw Mr. Marshall into the conversation, and addressing him with just the shade of deference in his tone which their respective positions rendered peculiarly becoming—'don't you agree with me that Mrs. Marshall is highly to be envied for meeting with our best authors for the first time, at an age when she can really appreciate them, instead of growing up, like most young ladies nowadays, to speak of them as "stupid old things, not worth reading," simply because their outsides have been familiar to them on their fathers' library shelves ever since they can remember?'

Mr. Marshall seemed struck by what Maurice said, as by a new idea.

'There is a great deal in what you say, Mr.

Chesney,—a great deal,' he agreed. 'The present system of education has a good deal to be said against it, as well as in its favour. High pressure, my dear sir, high pressure everywhere, and far too much of it.—But, Eleanor, my dear,' he continued, turning to his wife, and speaking in a less didactic tone, 'where have you got all these books from? I am very glad to see you so well supplied. *My* bookshelves, I fear, contain very little literature likely to find favour in ladies' eyes.'

'Mr. Chesney has lent them to me,' answered Eleanor; 'and I am so much obliged to him.'

'So am I,' said her husband simply; and this time Maurice did not feel irritated by the lawyer's thanks.

'But, Mr. Chesney,' continued Eleanor, 'you said you would like to look over my German books. Can't you stay a little longer? Or, by the bye, couldn't you stay and dine with us?'

Her husband looked rather horrified.

'I fear, my dear,' he began solemnly, 'you forget; an evening with such quiet folks as we are is not likely to be very entertaining to Mr. Chesney.'

'But Mr. Chesney is quite alone at the Court,' persisted Mrs. Marshall, 'and that must be very dull.

Duller even than with such stupid people as we are, isn't it, Mr. Chesney?' and she looked up at him with one of her rare bright smiles, very difficult to resist; 'but please do *exactly* as you like. If you would rather not stay, just say so. *Truly*, we shall not be offended.'

'But I should like to stay very much indeed,' replied Maurice, 'if I really shall not trouble you in any way; and if—' here he looked doubtfully at his clothes. 'I fear I should not have time to go home and back before your dinner-hour.'

'Never mind about your clothes,' rejoined Eleanor composedly; 'very often we go for a walk after dinner, so you will be all right. I am very glad you can stay. Mr. Marshall will be glad to have some one to talk to, I know, and so shall I,' she added naïvely.

'Very glad indeed, my dear sir,' said her husband cordially; 'if you can make yourself at—'

But here Georgie, who had disappeared some time previously on a strawberry-hunt, came flying up, with the triumphant announcement that she had found 'three more, not very big ones, but quite ripe, hidden in the corner of the frame.'

'They will do for dessert, then,' remarked her

sister, 'as Mr. Chesney is going to stay to dinner, and you were so stingy to him of your strawberries at tea, Georgie. Run, dear, by the bye, and tell Esther to put another place at table.'

The little girl executed her message, returning in a few moments to ask her sister, with the most perfect disregard of Maurice's presence, if Betsey had not better prepare a little dish of cutlets, as she feared the roast of beef was rather small for four.

'Perhaps it would be as well,' answered Eleanor consideringly; 'for you see, Georgie, if we do not give Mr. Chesney enough dinner, he will be afraid ever to come back again. Yes, we had better have the cutlets, by all means.'

'And an omelette—an omelette with raspberry jam,' continued Georgie, dancing backwards along the path before them, as they were walking slowly towards the house; 'do say raspberry jam is your favourite, Mr. Chesney, for it is mine. There is *nothing* I like so much as raspberry omelette. Don't you remember, Petrea in *Das Haus* called it "Himmelspeise"? Do you know what "Himmelspeise" means, Mr. Chesney? and did you ever read *Das Haus*?'

Mr. Chesney was forced to confess he had never

done so, but made a fair shot at the translation of the word.

'Yes,' said Georgie patronisingly, 'so you do know German. *I* don't, but I have *Das Haus* in French. I'll lend it you, if you like, and you can read about "Himmelspeise."'

'Which certainly is *not* raspberry omelette,' said her sister. 'Your translation is not a good one. Petrea's favourite dish was pancakes, eaten with raspberry cream, Georgie. But you will certainly have no omelette of any kind to-day, unless you run and tell Betsey.'

'Then she may make one. O, that's lovely!' cried Georgie, as she flew off. 'I'll tell her Mr. Chesney wants one dreadfully. You'll see if it isn't good, Mr. Chesney. *I* call it "Himmelspeise," whether it's the same as Petrea's or not.'

Whether or not, it *was* very good. So was the whole of the simple little dinner, and Mr. Chesney enjoyed himself very much, notwithstanding the slight drawback of his host's rather overdone hospitality, and the disagreeable sensation of incongruity between the faces at the top and bottom of the table.

Home life, in its most natural and attractive

forms, was little known to Maurice, by character so peculiarly fitted to appreciate and enjoy it. And here at The Feathers he saw it to unusual advantage. The simplicity was untainted by the slightest shade of vulgarity; the windows of the low-roofed room in which they dined looked out on to a garden, such as one sees but once or twice in a lifetime; the one child of the party was lovely as a fairy. No wonder Mr. Chesney congratulated himself on his instinctive predilection for 'middle-class' society, and felt confirmed in the truth of the assertions, that had so often drawn forth Horatia's sneers, that for genuine vulgarity of conduct, heart, and mind, one need not search beyond the sacred precincts of their own exclusive class; that true refinement of daily life and thought blooms most luxuriantly in the shade. They were both wrong; perhaps, in a sense, both right: Horatia, with her fastidious prejudices; Maurice, with his crude revolt against them. Both wrong, however, as all must be who persist in the absurd attempt to define vulgarity or refinement as a distinction common to the class, instead of a characteristic peculiar to the individual.

Dinner over, another stroll in the garden followed; for the evenings were almost at their longest,

and lovely enough to seem all too short. Then, as it grew dark, they returned to the drawing-room, where, without being asked, Eleanor played to them till candles were brought in. Everything evidently went on as usual in the little household, even down to the host's taking a comfortable nap in his arm-chair — a breach of good manners which Maurice trusted was a proof of his beginning to feel at home with him as his guest; for his first experience of an evening at The Feathers left him strongly inclined to 'repeat the dose' on the earliest occasion. When the time came for him to say good-night, Mrs. Marshall suddenly recollected that he had not looked over her German books.

'May I come again to do so some day?' Mr. Chesney asked. 'You have the art of making one feel so much at home here, Mrs. Marshall, that it is rather dangerous if you do not want one to come again.'

'But we do want you to come again,' she said frankly; 'we do, really. I am very glad you feel at home with us, and it must be very dull for you sometimes at the Court just now, quite alone there. We shall really be glad to see you whenever you like to come.'

'We shall indeed, my dear sir,' added Mr. Marshall, who had wakened up from his nap quite brisk and hearty, and ready cordially to second his wife's invitation. Nor was his cordiality the less sincere, in that there mingled in it some flavour of gratification at the idea of now and then casually mentioning to some Easterton friend what 'very pleasant neighbours they had in the family at the Court. Young Chesney himself, a very agreeable intelligent young man, looks us up of an evening very frequently, and makes himself quite at home with us.'

We may deal tenderly with his innocent little bit of snobbishness, however, poor man; for considering the influences amidst which he had passed his life, his real independence of character stood out greatly to his credit, and laid the foundation of sincere respect and liking for him on the part of his young guest.

'He's really a good soul,' thought Maurice as he walked home; 'and, on the whole, I suppose that girl might have had a worse fate than being his wife. But—but—it goes against the grain rather. I wonder if she ever feels so herself? She doesn't *look* as if she ever had a misgiving; but women are so queer! Though surely she is genuine, if ever a woman was.

And she is such a child too. Perhaps she has never thought about it; perhaps it is true that she is practical and unimaginative, as she said of herself. And yet, to see her face over that *Ivanhòe!* She did not know I was watching her. Poor little soul! she's not pretty exactly; what is she? However, I've had a very pleasant evening, and I approve of the new tenants of The Feathers immensely, so

> "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
> Old Time is still a-flying;
> And this same flower that smiles to-day,
> To-morrow may be dying."

A good thing Horatia's out of earshot!'

CHAPTER VII.

HOW THEY EAT LOTUSES AT CHESNEY.

Jamais je n'ai vu autant de fleurs et d'oiseaux dans mon jardin.' *Maîtres Mosaïstes.*

THERE came, however, a spell of bright sunny weather for the rosebuds that summer at Chesney. There was no sign of dying or decay in flowers or anything else. 'Old Time' in a deceitful mood, pretending to take it easy just then, had a smile on his face bright enough to have deluded wiser heads and hearts than those of the young people with whom we have to do.

'I have always thought there was no place in the world like Chesney,' thought Maurice; 'but this summer I think it is nicer than ever. Having The Feathers to go to whenever I am inclined just gives me the amount of society I like, and no more.'

And this account of the state of matters was less selfish and one-sided than it might seem at first sight.

If he got a good deal of pleasure from the hospitality of his brother's tenants, he gave a fair share in return. They all liked him: Mr. Marshall for his 'well-upness' in the affairs of the day, his pleasant manners, and the practical good sense which underlay his rather excessive share of youthful egotism, and crude, though honest, spirit of opposition to the tyranny of conventionality and prejudice. Georgie liked him because he treated her with the deference she loved; because, too, he was a capital playmate, an enthusiast in respect of all the country delights so dear to her childish heart. And Eleanor liked him with a liking that far exceeded that of the others, though she might have found it far from easy to define. He was growing to fill a void in her life, to give her a sympathy she had little hoped ever to receive; even now, in the early days of their friendship, she was beginning to feel this, to say to herself he came nearer her ideal of a brother, in the fullest sense of the word, than she had ever thought it possible she could realise in her own experience. It was the highest and most attractive side of his character that was first revealed to her; for her influence over him was a happy one. There was about her no absurd frivolity, or petty affectations and in-

sincerities, to draw forth his cynicism; no 'social shams' or pretensions in her surroundings to disgust and irritate him. For exceptional, and unnatural almost, as was her position as a wife, it was not the great fact of her life; its influence was not obtrusive. After the first sensation of glaring incongruity, Maurice got accustomed to it: Mr. Marshall became to him a sort of institution; he was there beside her in his place as her husband, but so far as he affected Eleanor in her individual character he might always have been there; he might have been her father, her uncle, her legal protector of some kind ever since she had been in existence. And not a bad sort of institution, in his way. If he did not add to the general harmony, at least he introduced no discord therein. So, throughout this pleasant summer all the members of the little party that met so frequently were very content with things as they were; never grew uneasy except at the thought of change.

There was one impending change, the terror of which was never long absent from the elder sister's heart; and one of the first strong links formed between herself and Mr. Chesney had its origin in the real sympathy he felt for her in the matter. He had not entered into her feelings on the subject at

the very beginning of their acquaintance; he thought them exaggerated and a little tiresome, a slight blot on the serenity and fair proportions of her character. But when he grew to know the child Georgie; to feel interested in her for her own sake, though still more for her sister's; to comprehend the place she filled in the whole being and existence of the motherless, childless young wife, *then* it became all plain to him; he entered almost too vividly into the acuteness of sorrow with which Eleanor anticipated the separation. Too vividly, in one sense; for there were times at which he could hardly repress a feeling of unreasonable resentment against the calm, stolid, good sense of the guardian, who, seeing that the thing was, as he firmly believed, for his charge's good, was as inflexible as a rock in his determination that it should be. Maurice, of course, never allowed any such feeling to escape him; but he found plenty of ways, without this, in which to show his kindly sympathy with Mrs. Marshall; plenty of little devices with which, if not to comfort her, at least to turn her thoughts temporarily in pleasanter directions. With more unselfish forethought for her than most people would have credited him with possessing, he tried to give her mind new material to work upon,

on which, in the barer future before her, it might instinctively fall back. He lent her books; he explained what puzzled her; in fact, imperfectly, superficially educated though he was himself, he did a good deal to help on her education, in the narrower sense of the word; and she, on her part, in utter unconsciousness taught him, not mind only, but heart and soul, those lessons which only a good woman, though assuredly not a silly one, can ever teach a man. Lessons which many and many a man never learns; which certainly, but for the lawyer's wife, would have ever remained unknown to Maurice Chesney, for all his would-be philosophical speculation, his dabbling in every sort of science, his young man's 'knowledge of the world.'

Of course it came about very gradually, this intimacy of Mr. Chesney's at The Feathers, and friendship with its inhabitants. It was quite contrary to Maurice's habits and ideas to became a 'tame cat,' even of the least objectionable kind, in any house, however charming; to make use of the 'general invitations' of any host and hostess, however hospitable. But these general invitations were so unmistakably sincere; he could not but see they really did 'make no difference' for him; it was very dull alone at the

Court sometimes, and it was never dull in the old garden at The Feathers. Eleanor enjoyed his books, and enjoyed still more, as she frankly told him, the talking them over with him afterwards; he was making good progress in his German too, thanks to Mrs. Marshall's assistance; and Georgie even, now and then, was kind enough to volunteer to hear him read French, and correct his pronunciation. In short, there was always something to be done; if no books to be discussed or lessons to be given, there were plenty of equally charming occupations. Long walks to some picturesque ruin in the neighbourhood, or gipsy tea-parties in the woods, at which Mr. Chesney's assistance in piling fires and coaxing kettles to boil was found invaluable; and both Eleanor and Georgie declared the only wonder was, how they had ever done without him.

Mr. Marshall was but seldom able to make one in these expeditions, though invariably pleased to hear all about their adventures on their return, and whenever he could spare a holiday or half a holiday, he readily enough joined them in their rambles; though, 'not being as young as he had been,' he was invariably the most knocked-up of the little party.

Chesney was even quieter than usual just then;

for the family at the Vicarage, who, in their way, added a little to the life of the village, had taken flight, the measles having culminated in the orthodox manner by a visit to the seaside; the Sunday duties being taken for the time by one or two neighbouring curates, or now and then, failing better, by some luckless individual of the genus known in Scotland as 'stickit ministers,' of which, as in every country district, two or three were to be found in this part of Woldshire; — schoolmasters generally, on their own very small account, through the week; only too thankful for the rare privilege of donning a surplice, and earning the accompanying fee.

'We have certainly had some wonderful specimens in the way of parsons lately,' said Maurice one Sunday evening when he had accompanied the Marshalls home from the afternoon service, and, as was not seldom the case, had ended by staying to dinner at The Feathers. 'It sets one wondering where such queer creatures crop up from. Though anything is a relief after old Bland's shouting.'

'I don't think Mr. Bland is old,' said Georgie, joining in the conversation, after her usual free-and-easy fashion; 'I am sure he is not nearly as old as Mr. Marshall.'

'Hush, child!' said Maurice sharply, though in a low tone, looking up hastily from the book he was reading in a very idle fashion, and muttering to himself, 'What geese children are!'

But he did Georgie injustice: Mr. Marshall was not within hearing; he had strolled down the garden-path towards the brook before Mr. Chesney had made his remark. His 'hush!' however, had caught other ears besides those for whom it was intended; Eleanor was looking at him with a slight smile on her face.

'Georgie *is* rather too ready with her observations,' she agreed—'all the same, I don't think this one would have mattered. Mr. Marshall is not at all sensitive on the subject of his age. He often amuses us by telling us how different things were when he was young, what changes he remembers, and how things we were taught as history he can recollect actually happening.'

Nothing could have been simpler than this little speech of Eleanor's; there was tact, too, in her quiet way of turning aside any awkwardness that might have been left in Maurice's mind by his blundering correction of Georgie's remark; but still he felt uncomfortable and irritated. There were times, and this was one of them, when Eleanor's serenity, her

apparently unruffled satisfaction with things as they were, annoyed him most unreasonably, when he would actually have admired her more had she been less worthy of his admiration. Then, again, his irritation would give place to a sort of wondering pity.

'Was she asleep, poor child?' he would ask himself. If not, how came it that a creature with such depths of feeling as he knew her to possess, such poetry, such imagination, such passionate sympathy with the heroes and heroines of the books she delighted so to read, could have accepted such a life, nay more, could be content with it, calmly satisfied to know that for her all beyond, all outside this jog-trot, monotonous, middle-aged existence was over? or not "over;" had never been, must never be. For he had long ago discarded all idea of any closer, more vivid interest having entered into this girl's life than those she had frankly confided to him; he knew by sure instinct that this had never been the case; her eyes, soft and deep as they were, were yet the innocent, untroubled eyes of a child rather than of a woman. 'Would they always remain so?' he asked himself sometimes; and then he laughed at himself for his exaggerated interest in the girl. 'A sweet lovable woman as ever lived,' he would pronounce

her, 'but wise in her generation, young as she was; prosaic and practical enough to be very sensibly contented with her lot. And a very good thing too, though I am "high-flown" enough to feel as if it went rather against the grain sometimes.'

And with a mental shrug of the shoulders he would dismiss the puzzling subject, the riddle of this strange inconsistency in a character apparently so easy to read. Still, ever and anon he would find his mind returning to the speculation—much more frequently, however, when alone than when in Eleanor's actual presence; for then, as a rule, her perfect simplicity and ingenuousness, the heartiness with which she threw her whole being for the time into the interest of the moment, made it impossible to regard her save as the most transparent and uncalculating of human creatures.

It was only very rarely—as, for instance, on this Sunday evening—that her manner irritated him, and on this particular occasion not improbably it irritated him the more from his consciousness of having been guilty of a breach, however slight, of tact and presence of mind. He made no answer to Eleanor's well-meant, perhaps rather prim little speech, but returning to his book, affected to be deeply interested

in its contents. Deluded man, for a moment to imagine that any one who had had the misfortune to offend an *enfant terrible* of Miss Georgie's type would be let off so easily!

There was silence for a few moments, Eleanor wondering if she had said anything to offend Mr. Chesney, Georgie less innocently occupied in deliberating how to avenge her wounded dignity. She thought of fetching a spider from the wall at the end of the garden, and putting it quietly to crawl down Maurice's face; but it was a long way to the bottom of the garden, and she was not particularly partial to spiders herself, and rather feared Mr. Chesney was; she thought of half filling his hat with flour, as Alphonse had once done to the hat of his brother-in-law the Professor; but then she would be in bed before Maurice went home, and the sweet spectacle of her fulfilled revenge would be lost to her. She got tired of thinking what she would do at last, and contented herself with the absurdly disproportionate retaliation of quietly creeping up to his side and suddenly snatching his book out of his hands. It fell to the ground.

'What's the matter now, Georgie?' asked Mr. Chesney quietly, as he stooped to pick it up. She

grew still more indignant, and the usual remonstrating 'Georgie!' which she saw on her sister's lips, added fuel to the flame.

'I know it's rude,' she burst out; 'but if I am rude, *he*,' indicating Maurice by a contemptuous nod of her head, 'is very, very cross. Why did you say "hush!" to me in that nasty cross way? I wasn't saying any harm. You said Mr. Bland was old, and I said he wasn't as old as Mr. Marshall. And he isn't—not nearly. Mr. Marshall is ever so much older; he's old enough to be my grandfather, I should think. I'm quite sure he's old enough to be Nelly's father. I've heard people say so; and I didn't want Nelly to marry him at all, and she didn't either, I know; only mamma wanted her to marry him because we had no one to take care of us. And why do you look cross at me because I said he was old? It's quite true.'

She rattled on with her childish defence of herself so fast that it was impossible to stop her. For an instant or two, Maurice hardly knew what to say or do. Half unconsciously he glanced towards Eleanor: her face was burning; he could tell instinctively the hot tears were not far from her eyes. He had his wish at last — of seeing her moved from her calm

satisfaction, her serene content with her lot. It must be true, then, this story of thoughtless Georgie's, this explanation of her sister's unsuitable marriage. It explained more to him than the child herself understood, of the motives which had led a girl like Eleanor Urquhart to give herself to a man old enough truly to be her father, in so many ways unfitted to be her husband. It had been from no selfish motives, this sacrifice of hers, however mistaken; of that, Georgie's hasty words convinced him on the spot. 'Poor child!' he whispered to himself, as he caught sight of the flushed face and drooping head, 'poor child!'

Yet never had he so admired and respected her as now, when the explanation of what had so puzzled him was thus suggested;—an explanation bearing truth in its face, from its consistency with what he already knew of the circumstances of her life—the mingled strength and self-forgetting yieldingness of her character.

'A sad mistake on her part, and worse a great deal on the part of those that let her do it,' he thought to himself. 'It is to be hoped, however, she will never find it out.'

But a very few moments had passed since Georgie

had left off talking—time enough, nevertheless, for all these reflections to pass through Maurice's mind, and for him thoroughly to regain his somewhat startled wits. He felt exceedingly angry with Georgie—very much inclined to give her a good box on the ears; but for Eleanor's sake he controlled himself. He turned to the child, still trembling with the excitement of her passionate indignation, and spoke to her quietly.

'If I spoke crossly, Georgie,' he said, 'I beg your pardon. Still, I don't see why you should be so very angry with me. Mr. Marshall might very easily have been within hearing of your remarks without your knowing it. I thought he was, and so I tried to warn you. You know as well as I do that people of a certain age—past twenty, we'll say—do not like personal remarks about being old, and so on. You won't like it yourself, you'll see, in a few years.'

Georgie's offended dignity was appeased on the spot; her ruffled plumes smoothed down. The 'you know as well as I do' had a magical effect.

'Of course,' she replied in a mollified tone—'of course, I know that *quite* old people like—' but she did not finish her comparison; '*really* old people, I mean, do not like rude remarks about their being

old, and having no hair and false teeth. That would be like the rude little boys and girls in *Punch*, who stir their tea with the snuffers, and all sorts of things *I* would never do, you know, Mr. Chesney. I wouldn't have said even that of Mr. Marshall's being older than Mr. Bland, if he had been near enough to hear. But I didn't know people might be offended at their ages being talked about when they're only past twenty. Why, Nelly is twenty-two.—Do *you* mind my telling how old you are, Nelly?' And she suddenly turned to her sister.

'I certainly think you might get something more interesting to talk about,' said Eleanor laughingly, trying evidently to make her voice sound just as usual. Georgie looked rather puzzled; but no more was said on the subject, for Mr. Marshall just then rejoined them, with various reminders that it was getting chilly, the dew beginning to fall, &c.; in deference to which the little party adjourned to the house. The rest of the evening passed much as usual. Eleanor played and sang, and seemed as bright and cheerful as ever, bade Maurice good-night, and hoped they would soon see him again, as cordially as usual. Still, Mr. Chesney felt that the little episode of the evening had left a slight constraint

behind it—a vague sensation of awkwardness and discomfort, which he regretted perhaps more than it deserved; for it was the first shadow of a cloud on the hitherto unbroken brightness of their carelessly happy intercourse. Yet he was not altogether sorry it had happened: he was glad of anything which helped him to know her better.

A day or two later he got a note from Eleanor, asking him to join them in an expedition to the Swirl falls. They intended to drive there, taking luncheon with them, and to walk back to The Feathers in the cool of the afternoon in time for dinner. She had persuaded Mr. Marshall to give himself a holiday, she wrote; he had been looking sadly fagged lately, and a rest would do him good. Maurice answered, he would be delighted to make one of the party. It was to be a picnic on a grander scale than usual, Georgie informed him when he arrived at the rendezvous on the appointed morning; for they were taking real luncheon—'pigeon-pie and cold chicken, you know, not just biscuits and sandwiches.' The child was in great spirits, and her gaiety was infectious. Even Mr. Marshall caught some of it, and Eleanor looked bright and sunny. Altogether, the expedition promised to be a success.

The falls of the Swirl, though described in no guide-book, are pretty and picturesque; certainly well worth going six miles to see, which is their distance from Chesney village.

'It must be twenty years, at least, since I was last here,' said Mr. Marshall, when the little party had comfortably established itself in a sort of grassy niche among the rocks at the side of the water, whence a good view of the falls was to be obtained.

'Before I was born,' observed Georgie sagely, as if the world must have been in a very benighted state before that event took place. 'Dear me, how very funny it seems!'

'Twenty years hence, my dear, you will hardly be inclined to describe the flight of Time as "very funny," I fancy,' returned Mr. Marshall sententiously. It was a peculiarity of his, that he always grew sententious when he was feeling particularly comfortable. Eleanor had learnt to know this, and smiled; but Georgie, who hated to have her expressions pulled to pieces, gave herself a little shake and looked cross. Eager to prevent the two hostile spirits from clashing, and spoiling their pleasant day, Eleanor made the first remark that came into her head.

'The falls are surely rather poor to-day,' she said.

'There does not seem to me to be nearly as much water as when Georgie and I were here in the spring.'

Maurice looked at the water critically.

'There's a fair amount of water,' he said; 'more than one would have expected, considering the dry weather lately. We always consider the falls are pretty full when we can't see the whole of the Lady's steps.'

'What are the Lady's steps?' asked Georgie eagerly, pricking up her ears.

'Don't you know them?' exclaimed Mr. Chesney in surprise. 'Do you mean to say you have been several times at the Swirl falls without ever having the Lady's steps pointed out to you? I am truly amazed at you, Georgie—a young lady whose head is so stuffed with legends of all kinds too!'

Georgie laughed. She did not resent this kind of bantering.

'There was no one to tell us,' she answered simply. 'Nelly and I always go walks alone, you know—till quite lately, at least, when you have come with us sometimes. But do show me the Lady's steps, Mr. Chesney; and if there is a story about them, O, *do* tell it me!' And she clasped her hands beseechingly.

'Those are the steps up there—do you see?—where the water seems sucked in, as if there was a miniature whirlpool. You can only see the top ones; there are five altogether,' said Maurice, pointing to a spot somewhat higher up, where some large flat stones, ranged one above the other, took the form of a rough natural staircase, the lower steps hidden by the dashing foamy water.

'I see!' cried Georgie, after the usual amount of staring in the wrong direction; 'I see! Yes; they're just like steps made on purpose. I wonder we never saw them before—don't you, Nelly?—I should like to step down them, Mr. Chesney.—Do let me, Nelly!'

'Would it be dangerous?' she asked, turning to Mr. Chesney.

'Very—' he began to say; but Mr. Marshall interrupted him. 'Of course it would,' said the lawyer sharply; 'how can you let your sister be so foolish, Eleanor?'

'It really is dangerous,' Mr. Chesney hastened to add, seeing the black dog's sulky face beginning to creep round Georgie's pretty little shoulders again. 'Look, Georgie, at the other side of the steps from the sort of little whirlpool I showed you; don't you see how black and still the water seems? There's

a deep pool there; and thereby hangs the tale, such as it is, of the Lady's steps.' He shook his head mysteriously.

'The tale!' repeated Georgie, 'the tale of the lady! O, do—do tell it me, Mr. Chesney!' She had quite forgotten her impending fit of the sulks, in her eagerness to hear the story.

'It's very little to tell, Georgie,' he said kindly; 'not worth calling a tale. Only that the poor lady from whom the steps take their name stepped down them once too often—stepped down into the pool, in fact, and was heard of no more.'

'Did she do it on purpose?' 'Who was she?' and 'When may this have happened, Mr. Chesney?' demanded his three hearers in a breath.

'O, ages ago!' replied he. 'She was a Lady something or other—I forget her name, if ever I heard it—of Blendon: that place near here, where there are the ruins of an old house that must have been fine in its day. It belongs to the Berners, the late member for Coveby, you know, Mr. Marshall.' He turned for a moment to the lawyer, who nodded his head in response. 'There is no modern house there, though they are always talking of building one. The old one must have been very fine, and

beautifully situated too. But that has nothing to say to my story. Well, this Lady somebody—'

'Don't call her that,' interrupted Georgie; 'it sounds so ugly, it quite spoils the story. *Can't* you remember her name?'

Maurice shook his head.

'Well, then, make one. I often make names for my stories.'

'Can't,' said Maurice, shaking his head again, more lugubriously than before. 'I'm like Mrs. Marshall—I've no imagination. You suggest a name, Georgie, for the nameless heroine, who, however, is really not worth all this preamble.'

'Let me see,' considered Georgie; 'what are the prettiest names I know? Adeline, Hildegarde, Gabrielle, Marguerite. Will any of those do?'

'Mais non, child,' exclaimed Nelly, laughing. 'Those are all French or German, and the lady who stepped into the pool was English.'

'Marguerite is English,' persisted Georgie; 'there was Marguerite Fernley at Rochette. She was English.'

'Only half,' replied Eleanor; 'and her real name was Margaret. Margaret will do, I daresay. Won't it, Mr. Chesney?'

'Or Margery,' suggested Mr. Marshall, to the great astonishment of his companions, and not a little to his own, at the brilliancy of the idea that had suddenly struck him. 'Margery is an older form of Margaret, is it not? I once had a very old aunt called Margery.'

'Capital!' exclaimed Maurice, and Mr. Marshall's self-satisfaction increased visibly. 'Margery's the very name.'

Georgie evidently did not think so, so he hastened on the faster with his story.

'Well, this Lady Margery (observe, there were no misses or mistresses in those days; they were all "ladies") was the wife, as I said—'

'You didn't say so,' objected Georgie; but he took no notice of the interruption.

'Was the wife,' he went on, 'of one of the old owners of Blendon. She was very young and very beautiful, and, as is, I am told, by no means the fashion in these days, she loved her husband very much.'

Here a slight movement beside him interrupted Maurice. He glanced round. It was only Eleanor rearranging herself, and smoothing her dress, which had got a little crumpled.

'Please be quiet, Nelly,' whispered Georgie, by this time all eyes and ears for 'the story.'

'So much,' Maurice continued calmly, 'that they were more like lovers than sober married folk; and when an order came for the husband to follow the king to the wars—I don't know what king it was, or what wars they were, so pray don't ask me—it came uncommonly near to breaking this silly little lady's heart. However, it had to be; so, after the saddest of farewells, the poor things parted. The wars continued a sad long time, and the longer her lord's absence lasted, the sadder grew sweet Margery. Her only comfort was found in the fulfilment of a vow she had made, that every moonlight night, that is to say, whenever there was light enough for her to pick her steps, she would come here—to the Swirl falls—at midnight, and stepping down to the lowest of those five stones, or steps, if you like to call them so, would kneel thereupon for a whole hour, quite alone, praying for her husband's safe return. Why she made this strange vow, I am unable to say. Perhaps the place was associated with pleasant walks in happier days, and the mixture of penance in the proceeding would, of course, greatly recommend itself to the poor soul as all the more

likely to render her prayers effectual. Any way, whatever may have been her motive for choosing this strange oratory, hither she came, many and many a night, summer and winter, whenever there was moon enough for her to see her way. At last, there came a night, when she set off from home as usual, and never returned. She had been seen, it was said, by some late passer-by, kneeling in her usual place; but when her people got alarmed, and came out to seek for her, she was nowhere to be found. And that was the end of poor Lady Margery.'

'Did they never find her body?' asked Eleanor, after a little pause. 'And did her husband never come home? I hope he never did,' she added in a lower voice.

'They did not find her body for a long time,' said Maurice; 'not for months. Then they found it, or what had been it, poor thing! ever so far away down the river, caught in a little creek. It was winter time when she was drowned, and it may have been frozen in one of these little creeks; there are several where it freezes in sharp winters. They recognised her by her dress, and took her home to Blendon, and had a grand funeral, and buried her in the Blendon burial-place, at old Whipstay church.

Now comes the queerest part of the story. *Pray* remember, I do not vouch for its correctness.

> "I cannot tell how the truth may be,
> I say the tale as 'twas said to me."—

All this time, whether the fighting was over or not, nothing had been heard of the husband. The Blendon burial-place had not been opened for a long time, and there was, so they say, only one way of getting into it. But when they took the remains of poor Lady Margery down into the vault—if there were vaults in those days—to their amazement there they found a new coffin, all comfortably installed in its place, bearing the name of the absent Lord of Blendon, and the date of his death; the very day, or night, rather, on which the poor wife had said her last prayer for his safety, on the slippery stone, in sight of the Swirl falls. There now, isn't that a wonderful ending to my tragic tale, Georgie?'

The child was greatly impressed. 'I wonder if it is true,' she said thoughtfully. 'I wonder if they opened the coffin to see if he was really in it.'

'That I cannot tell,' replied Maurice, 'often as I asked the question of the old woman that told me all the details of the story when I was a boy. Any way,

the husband never turned up again; I can satisfy you as to that, Mrs. Marshall,' he said, turning to Eleanor. 'So let us hope that, however they came there, they were the veritable remains of poor Margery's husband, that they left to rest beside those of the faithful wife in the vault at Whipstay.'

'I hope they were both good people, and that their spirits went together, straight up to heaven,' observed Georgie.

'I hope so too, seeing all *we* know of them is good, my dear Georgie,' replied Maurice with perfect gravity.

Mr. Marshall looked rather shocked.

> '"The knight's bones are dust,
> And his good sword rust:
> His soul is with the saints, I trust,"'

quoted Eleanor timidly, blushing as she did so, but smiling as she met Maurice's eye.

'That's out of one of *your* books, I know, Mr. Chesney,' remarked Georgie; and they all laughed at her, which encouraged her to propose they should 'go on telling stories.'

'We've eaten all the luncheon, and it's too hot to go scrambling about any more,' she said. '*Do* somebody tell a story.'

'You're the best-behaved young lady of my acquaintance,' said Maurice solemnly; whereupon Georgie knocked his hat over his eyes, and her guardian looked more shocked than before.

'Georgie—' he began uneasily. 'Eleanor, my dear—' But Maurice interrupted him.

'It is I you must scold, not Georgie, Mr. Marshall,' he exclaimed. 'I was very impertinent, I know. Tell me, what must I do to make amends? do, Georgie.'

'Tell us another story—a proper one,' returned the best-behaved young lady of his acquaintance, in a but-half-mollified tone. 'Not *that* kind—you know I didn't mean that kind—but a proper story—a tale.'

'But I can't remember any, truly I can't,' he pleaded; 'and I can't make one, for I have no imagination, as I told you just now, Georgie. Mrs. Marshall, can't you inspire me?' and he glanced at Eleanor mischievously.

'Georgie, you're a tease,' was all the assistance vouchsafed by Nelly.

Inspiration came again from an unexpected quarter. Mr. Marshall was heard to clear his throat.

'Speaking of legends,' he began, 'it has often been on my mind to ask you to explain to me, Mr.

Chesney, an observation which I remember you made the first evening I had the pleasure of meeting you —at the marriage of Miss Nugent, you remember? It referred—your observation, I mean—to the origin of the name of my present house, The Feathers. Not that it is a very uncommon sign for an inn; but I remember you spoke of the *Chesney* Feathers as having an origin of their own. It was brought to my mind by our gardener the other day finding in one of the outhouses, where it had been put at the time of the alterations, I suppose, the old signboard of The Feathers. To my surprise, the feathers of the sign were not arranged like a Prince of Wales' plume, as one usually sees, and this recalled to me your observation.'

'There are only two feathers on the signboard,' added Mrs. Marshall, 'one red and one white, and a hand is holding them. It is so odd-looking.'

'I remember it very well,' said Maurice; 'and there is a legend attached to it, as you supposed, Mr. Marshall. I am surprised you have not heard it; but still, I daresay, not many people know it quite correctly. But it is not nearly so old a story as the Blendon legend.'

'Is it a pretty story?' asked Georgie.

'I think it pretty, of course,' said Maurice; 'it is our pet legend. But though it is not as sad as the other story, it is decidedly more "fearsome."'

'O, do tell it,' said the child, 'do tell it; though when you get to the horrible part, I know I shall scream.'

'Suppose you scream now, before I begin,' suggested Mr. Chesney. 'I can wait till you tell me you have finished, and it would be better than interrupting me.'

His hat was very nearly knocked over his eyes again; but Nelly caught the indignant little hands and held them fast.

'Now tell us the story, please, Mr. Chesney,' she said; 'I'll keep Georgie quiet till you are fairly under weigh—then she'll be quiet enough.'

'Well,' began Maurice, 'first of all, as before, there's not much to tell, I warn you. About—let me see—two hundred years ago, when the civil war which ended in the Commonwealth first began, our people were among the first to mix themselves up in it. They were Royalists, of course, though that hasn't much to do with the story. At that time there were two sons and a daughter at Chesney—it's rather odd that several generations have had this

same number of children—and there was also an unfortunate young person, a distant cousin, awfully poor and desperately beautiful (you see what an orthodox story it is), with whom the elder son, Thomas, fell in love, and she with him, just because it was the very last thing they had any business to do. The younger brother, Robert, must have been a very good sort of fellow; he was very much attached to poor Thomas, and to the pretty cousin too, and did all he could to help them. But the sister must have been a spiteful creature; she found out the secret, and announced her discovery to the authorities, whereupon there was a grand row, and the cousin was turned out of doors on the spot. She did not wander far, however; she took refuge secretly with the usual old nurse, or family dependent of some kind, who always turns up on these occasions, and who happened to live in a cottage on the site of your present house. There the poor girl—Anne was her name—lived in concealment for some months; thence, with Robert's help, Thomas privately married her, and took her away from the neighbourhood for some time. But when the war broke out, and Thomas had to be at Chesney, collecting all the men he could get among their own people to join the royal stan-

dard, poor Anne insisted on returning there too, and again took up her abode in the old servant's cottage, where she could see, or at least hear of, Thomas daily. There she stayed till she had seen the last of him; that is to say, till he had set off to join the army at the head of the men he and his brother had collected. (Their father was past fighting, though in full possession of his mental faculties, and a vindictive old fellow he must have been, to judge by his behaviour to Anne.) The morning the brothers left Chesney, they passed out of the village by the end where The Feathers now stands. On pretence of speaking to his old nurse, Thomas fell out of his place at the head of his men for a few minutes, and alighted at the cottage for another farewell. At the very last moment, Anne begged him to give her something—a glove, a ribbon, anything he had about him—for a love-token. Thinking nothing too good to be sacrificed to her least whim, Thomas tore the plume—two pure white ostrich feathers (valuable things in those days)—out of his cavalier's cap, and left them in her hand, then hurried off to overtake his brother, with a sad heart, I daresay, though probably no sadder than that of the poor solitary girl he was obliged to leave behind him. What her vow was

to Lady Margery, Georgie, the feathers seem to have been to Anne Chesney. She never let them out of her sight, but sat and stared at them incessantly; the old nurse thought she was bewitched, as I suppose, like all people who fall desperately in love, in a sense she was. There came news, now and then, from the brothers; all good news at first, nothing but successes and certain prospects of victory. Then for some weeks nothing was heard, and Anne's heart grew very sick with fear. One day, worn out with anxiety, she fell into a heavy sleep, and slept on steadily for hours, the feathers as usual clasped firmly in her hands. The old servant left her undisturbed, so she slept on till the next morning, when the nurse was wakened by fearful shrieks. She rushed to her mistress's room, and there she found the poor creature screaming and raving like a lunatic, and pointing to the feathers, which—listen, Georgie—during her sleep had turned from pure white (she had guarded them from the least spot or stain) to a bloody crimson—not a bright red, but a dull brownish crimson—just exactly as if they had been dipped in blood some hours previously, and had dried to this ghastly shade. Of course, you can guess the rest of the story. Robert arrived a few days after, with the

wretched remains of their unfortunate little band, and news of poor Thomas's death—at Marston Moor, I think it was that he was killed—the evening of the ghostly transformation of his plume.'

Georgie shivered, and looked very creepy.

'Did they always stay blood colour after that?' she asked.

'I suppose so,' answered Maurice; 'at least, I never heard to the contrary. They were buried with Anne, by her particular request.'

'Then she died too?' said Eleanor.

'Not immediately. She lived a little while, till the birth of her son, from whom we are all descended. The brother Robert behaved like a brick. He might easily have disowned his nephew, and installed himself as his father's heir; but he stood out for the child's rights, and treated him like his own son. So, after all, I suppose, there should be some good among us, seeing there have been honest folk now and then among our ancestors.'

'But how did the nurse's cottage come to be The Feathers?' asked Mrs. Marshall.

'O, I was forgetting to tell you,' replied Maurice. 'When the old squire died, and Robert, acting for his nephew, came to the head of affairs, he built a

very good house on the site of the cottage, and made it into an inn, of which the old servant's son became the landlord. With some queer idea of doing honour to the memory of the unfortunate young couple, they took the feathers for its sign, and the name has always stuck to it; and always will, I fancy, as I warned Mr. Marshall some time ago.'

'I don't object to it, my dear sir; not at all, I assure you,' said the lawyer urbanely; 'the less so since hearing your most interesting account of the origin of the name.'

'Then is The Feathers haunted, Mr. Chesney?' whispered Georgie in an awe-struck voice.

'Nay, my dear Georgie, how can I tell?' he answered lightly. 'I should rather ask you, considering you live in it, and I don't.—Perhaps you can tell us, Mrs. Marshall,' he added, turning to Eleanor. 'If I remember right, you are rather fond of ghosts than otherwise. Has my beautiful ancestress ever appeared to you, kissing the bloody plume, some moonlight night?'

'I never said I should like to see a ghost, Mr. Chesney. I only said I was not afraid of dead people,' replied Eleanor. 'When I see poor Anne, I shall let you know. But you are mixing up the two stories,'

she went on, as if rather eager to change the subject. 'There was nothing about moonlight in the Chesney legend. Tell me, was the heroine of the first an ancestress of the Berners, who, you say, own Blendon now?'

'O dear, no!' said Maurice. 'The Berners are very new people. What makes you ask?'

'I don't know,' answered Eleanor hesitatingly, and blushing a little. 'Your heroine was very beautiful, you said. I was wondering if Miss Berners was like her. *She* is very beautiful.'

'You have seen Miss Berners, then?' said Mr. Chesney rather sharply, looking closely at Eleanor as he spoke, which made her feel increasingly self-conscious and uncomfortable. 'You don't *know* her, do you?'

'O, no,' replied Mrs. Marshall; 'I have only seen her once—no, twice; but I have hardly spoken to her; only her great beauty impressed me, of course.'

'She *is* very pretty, wonderfully pretty,' said Maurice, rather indifferently. 'I hardly think I would say *beautiful*, though.' As he spoke there came across his mind the remembrance of having made this same remark with regard to Miss Berners before. Yes; it had been to Mr. Marshall, at Squire Nugent's

dinner-table, the night before the marriage. '*Beautiful*,' he went on, 'to my mind, conveys a very different idea.' Instinctively he raised his eyes; they fell on Eleanor's face. She was watching him intently, a sort of questioning wistful expression in her eyes, which reminded him of the first time he had seen her, before he had known her to be the lawyer's wife. 'A very different idea,' he repeated; and a vision of Amethyst, with her brilliant colouring, perfect little features, and cold, set, self-satisfied expression, rose before him, seemed, as if challenging comparison, to float beside the young face, now flushing quickly, with the deep tender eyes, whose every change of expression he was learning to know so well.

He was silent for a moment; so was Eleanor, who suddenly withdrew her gaze, fearful of her secret speculations being legible in her face. But Maurice did not yield to the impression that he had felt creeping over him. He shook it off hastily.

'It's foolish to quibble about words,' he said. 'I daresay my ideas are very exaggerated and absurd. However, even if she had been her descendant, I could hardly have fancied any resemblance between the sort of beauty such a woman as Georgie's Margery must have possessed and that of a regular nine-

teenth-century young lady like Miss Berners. I confess I could not fancy the lovely Amethyst saying her prayers in an uncomfortable position for anybody's sake, or breaking her heart for either lover or husband.'

He laughed lightly; but the laugh did not sound hearty. A little damp seemed to have fallen on their spirits; and soon after, Mr. Marshall made his usual discovery, that it was growing late, and rather chilly, the clouds looked uncertain, &c. Had they not better be thinking of turning homewards?

It had been a very pleasant day; but Eleanor felt a little sorry she had brought the name of Miss Berners into the conversation.

CHAPTER VIII.

ELEANOR'S PHILOSOPHY.

'My mither didna speak,
But she lookit in my face till my heart was like to break.
* * * * * * *
* I'll do my best a gude wife to be,
For auld Robin Gray is a kind man to me.'

Auld Robin Gray.

'MR. CHESNEY,' said Eleanor one day, a week or two after the picnic to the falls, 'there is something I want to say to you, but I don't know how to say it.'

They were alone at the time—a rather unusual occurrence, as it was not often Georgie was absent from her sister's side; but this afternoon the charms of raspberry-gathering had allured her to the kitchen-garden, and Maurice found Mrs. Marshall by herself when he strolled in with a new batch of books for her delectation.

'I am afraid I can't help you out of the difficulty,

Mrs. Marshall,' he answered, 'unless I had some idea what it is you want to tell me. If it is anything you want to ask me to do, anything in which I could be of use to you, or to any of you, I trust you would *not* find it difficult to tell me of it. I trust you know me too well by this time not to know how delighted I should be to have a chance of doing *anything* in return for all your kindness to me.'

He looked at her rather eagerly as he spoke, and his tone was earnest. He thoroughly meant what he said. But Eleanor did not give very much attention to his words. She looked preoccupied and anxious.

'Thank you,' she answered. 'But it isn't that. I wouldn't mind asking you a favour, Mr. Chesney; I know you would never be offended by that sort of thing. But it isn't anything I want to ask you. It is something I want to tell you, to explain to you; and I am afraid of your misunderstanding me. And yet I have been so uncomfortable lately, fearing you have already misunderstood me, that I can't help trying to explain what must have struck you as—as—No; I don't know how to say it; it's no use.'

She turned away her head as she spoke, stopping abruptly in her speech; but Mr. Chesney had time

to see that the colour had risen painfully over her pale face, to hear the slight quiver in her voice which told of mental struggle and distress. He felt very sorry for her.

'If what you want to tell me is disagreeable—painful to you in any way, Mrs. Marshall,' he said, very gently, 'don't try to say it. I don't think I am likely to misunderstand you; most assuredly, I should never attempt or presume to *judge* you. All I do know of you, all I get to know of you, only increases my respect. I have no doubt that what I *don't* know of—of you and your past history would tend the same way. And perhaps I know, or have read for myself, more of you and your life than you suspect, Mrs. Marshall. So pray don't torment yourself about explaining anything. I could never do you injustice, though it is pleasant to me to think you care for my opinion at all.'

Eleanor turned towards him. Her face was still flushed, and in her eyes there was the curious suspicion of tears peculiar to her when she was more than usually moved, though she was a woman who seldom indulged in shedding them. Otherwise she had quite regained her self-control. But she looked very sweet and wistful, yet determined also, as if

she had made up her mind to the performance of a disagreeable task, and was resolved to go through with it at all costs.

'Thank you again, Mr. Chesney,' she said. ('I seem to be always saying "thank you" to you, don't I?' she went on, with an attempt at playfulness; 'you are so very patient with my fancies.) But this that I want to tell you isn't for my own sake only; it's for other people's too. You will guess, I daresay, that when I say I have been uncomfortable lately, I mean since that day that Georgie got into a passion, and said those things about—about me, you know, and my marriage. I haven't scolded her, poor child; she meant no harm, and, of course, she could not understand. I daresay it all seemed to her just as she said. But, Mr. Chesney'—and here her voice faltered a little, even though its tone grew almost beseeching—'it *wasn't* as she said; it isn't true. I could not *bear* you to think it.'

Half unconsciously, she drew a little nearer him, and laid her hand on his sleeve, looking up anxiously in his face. But he did not raise his eyes, which were bent downwards, nor did he appear to notice her almost childlike gesture. There was even a slight hardness, 'brusqueness' in his tone, when he spoke.

'To think what?' he inquired; adding hastily: 'Forgive me for seeming to cross-question you. I would never presume to do so; but if you really want me to understand, you must make your meaning clearer. What is it, Mrs. Marshall, you could not bear me to think? Why does it so much signify to you what opinion I, a perfect stranger, may form, or have formed, of the "others" to whom you refer?'

'Because those others—one of them, at least—that is to say, her memory; her dear sweet goodness and unselfishness, the remembrance of which is my best treasure now—because all about her, all connected with her, is dearer to me than anything else. Because I would die rather than let any one, even "a stranger," as you call yourself so suddenly, Mr. Chesney, think of her as anything but what she was—the best, the most unselfish of mothers; the least calculating or worldly of human beings.'

She spoke, in her excitement, somewhat incoherently; the words and expressions she employed might have seemed over-strained and exaggerated; but the earnestness, the solemnity almost, of her manner prevented their affecting Maurice otherwise than as she intended. He turned towards her now, speaking kindly, tenderly almost.

'I did not mean to call myself "a stranger" in that sense, Mrs. Marshall. I only meant I had no right, no grounds for forming any opinion; so how could mine be worth anything? In all that concerns *you*, I should be very sorry to think myself "a perfect stranger." Tell me what it is you are so afraid of my thinking—what mistaken impression you fear may have been left on my mind by Georgie's hasty words, though, indeed, I hardly like to ask you to tell me. It seems so horribly officious, presumptuous—I don't know all what, Mrs. Marshall?—for me to seem to be standing in judgment in this way—to be, as it were, forcing myself into your confidence.'

He looked as he felt—very uncomfortable. But Eleanor was far too much in earnest to be damped by his manner.

'But it isn't that at all, Mr. Chesney,' she exclaimed eagerly; 'if there's any forcing, it is I that am forcing my confidence on you; though I don't like to put it that way either. You have a right to understand this—the right of having been so good to me, of having taught me so much, of having made me open my mind to so many things I never thought of before. You have a right to hear, and I to tell, Mr. Chesney; for you have made me prize your re-

spect and care for your opinion. And how could you like or respect me if you thought *that* of me? You might blame others more, perhaps; but you could not but think poorly of any woman who could be forced into a marriage against her inclination. O, it wasn't that at all! You must never think so in the very least. There was no one to advise me even, much less to constrain me, except my dear mother, who never constrained me in her life. My marriage was my own doing, Mr. Chesney; that is what I want you to understand; and I have never for an instant regretted it. It pleased my mother, I know; for there was no one she thought so highly of as Mr. Marshall; but there was no urging. I did it quite, quite of myself. It was very, very good and kind of Mr. Marshall. It was real goodness, Mr. Chesney, that made him think of it: he upset all his life and habits for us, and he is so *very* good to us. I can never be grateful enough to him—never, even though sometimes I don't *quite* agree in what he thinks best. But it is wrong of me. I never can tell you how good he is.'

She stopped at last, almost out of breath; but Maurice did not answer at once. He hardly knew her, the calm serene Eleanor, in this eager excited

girl, panting to show him the story in what she evidently believed to be all truthfulness; glowing with indignation at the bare possibility of aspersion being cast on the memory of the mother she so loved and reverenced; of injustice being done to the husband to whom she believed, as she quaintly expressed it, she 'could never be grateful enough'! 'Grateful' for what? For his calm acceptance of her youth and beauty, thus sacrificed to his cold selfish middle age? All she had she had given him; all she *might* have had—all the fervid affection that somewhere in so rich a nature must be latent—all the sweet privileges, the sympathy, the appreciation that such a woman, sooner or later, could not but have won—all, all gone, or rather, never allowed to come—buried, before they had burst into blossom, the day this innocent infatuated child gave herself to be the lawyer's wife. Maurice ground his teeth at the thought. And now she calmly requested him to join her in admiring the 'goodness' of the man who had persuaded her to do this, in reverencing the memory of the mother who had stood by and felt 'pleased'! Truly, women are strange beings, thought Maurice. At that moment he felt nearer to hating Mr. Marshall than was at all an agreeable sensation.

Poor man! Was he never to have justice done him? For assuredly, if Eleanor placed him too high, Mr. Chesney degraded him too low.

It was only by strong self-control that Maurice kept silence for a few moments. Then he was rewarded by a softer sensation—a feeling of intense, pure, unselfish pity for this girl stole over him. The ingenuousness, the perfect good faith of her way of looking at things, the *naïveté* with which she ignored all self in the matter, her utter ignorance of her own attractions—all this touched him greatly. He forgot all about Mr. Marshall; he only thought of Eleanor herself, and felt as if he hardly knew whether to laugh or cry, while he considered how best to reply to her appeal, so as in no wise to wound her sensitiveness, by no breath to sully the innocence of her self-deception. It was difficult, she was watching him so eagerly. After all, she was the first to speak.

'Do you understand any better now?' she asked timidly; 'do you see how it all came about, and how fortunate it was, and what reason I have to feel grateful?'

'Yes,' he said at last, 'I think I understand. And I thank you *very* much for your confidence, for your caring that I *should* understand.'

Eleanor drew a deep breath.

'I am so glad,' she said in a tone of great relief; 'I am so glad I had courage to try to tell you. Now I feel quite comfortable. You don't know how it has teased me lately, how I have lain awake trying to think how I could destroy the effect of Georgie's foolish words, without — without saying anything which you might have thought me strange for saying. But it is all right now. I shall never be afraid of your misunderstanding me again. If people are friends, they should understand about each other, shouldn't they? And I don't think I have ever had as good a friend as you, Mr. Chesney. It is so funny,' she went on after a little pause, smiling slightly to herself, 'how things seem to fit so nicely.'

Maurice was not just then feeling peculiarly impressed by the harmony of things in general, but he spoke quietly, in his usual tone.

'What things, Mrs. Marshall? I confess things usually seem to me to have an extraordinary dislike to fitting. It is something new to come across some one whose experience has been more fortunate. But what things in particular were you thinking of? That is to say,' correcting himself, 'if you don't mind my asking.'

'Of course I don't,' she answered laughingly, but blushing a little nevertheless. 'I was only thinking ——You see, Mr. Chesney,' she broke off abruptly, 'though it is quite true what I say of myself, that I am matter-of-fact and practical, and not very like other girls—I mean, even before I was married I was not very like other girls of my age—and that therefore it was far the best thing for me to marry some one a good deal older than myself; I would not have suited a younger man: still, before I knew you so well, there were times when I felt rather lonely—not lonely exactly, but as if in some things I wanted sympathy that an elderly person, however good, *could* not give me. And then this is rather a lonely place. I am not very good at making friends with women, particularly young women; but even if I had been, there are none here. No one at all, except Mrs. Bland;' and at the notion of making a bosom friend of Mrs. Bland, Eleanor burst into an irrepressible little laugh. 'But since we have known you so well in this comfortable sort of way, I have never felt lonely at all. There was always you to talk books over with — to give me them in the first place; to consult about our little plans with, to sympathise with me about Georgie, to go to about any of the things I can-

not trouble Mr. Marshall about. That is what I mean about things seeming to fit so, Mr. Chesney. You seem to have given me all I wanted to make my life quite complete. I don't think I have ever been so happy as this summer. It seems dreadfully selfish to talk so much about myself and my own feelings, but I can't help it. It is the only way I can explain to you how much I have to thank you for.'

Maurice did not answer. Eleanor took fright.

'You are not offended with me, are you? You don't think me bold or forward, do you?' she asked eagerly.

'Bold or forward!' he repeated; 'how can you use such horrible words about yourself? If I did not answer immediately, it was only that I didn't know how to thank you for what you have said. I fear I have been very little good to any one in my life. You, who have lived for others ever since you lived at all, you cannot possibly conceive what pleasure it gives me to be told I have been any good, any comfort to any one, much more to you. What you have been, what you are to *me*, Mrs. Marshall, I can never tell you. You would not understand, if I tried to tell you. No one could who did not know, as I

do myself, all about myself and my life. I can never thank you. If only—' he stopped without finishing his sentence.

'If only what?' asked Eleanor. 'But suppose we finish our talk in the garden. I promised to go out to help to gather the raspberries. Won't you come?'

He followed her, and they strolled quietly down the path leading towards the fruit bushes.

'If only what?' repeated Eleanor.

'I don't quite know what,' said Maurice. 'It was only a vague sort of wish that things would stay as they are.'

'That it might be always summer and pleasant idleness, and you and all of us just what we are. Is that what you meant?'

'Partly, not quite,' he admitted.

'Well, certainly it can't always be summer,' continued Eleanor sagely; 'but *people* needn't change with the seasons. Friends can always be friends, any way, can't they?'

'I don't know,' replied Maurice gloomily; 'you see things in your own bright way. I wish to heaven I could see them as you do. But I can't. Everything is crooked. The things that do us the most good are the first we have to give up, or else

they give us up. Things change, and we change, and it's all crooked together.'

Eleanor looked at him in some surprise, but some distress too.

'You are in a cynical, sceptical humour to-day,' she said; 'but I won't give in to you. Things may change, but *we* need not. I cannot imagine anything, any outward circumstance, making me change to any one I have once really cared for.'

He looked at her very sadly.

'Have you ever been tried?' he said; but went on without waiting for an answer. 'It may seem an ungrateful, ungracious thing to say, but I cannot feel as sure of myself in that sort of way as you are. If things change, I fear I should change too. Not for the better, I daresay; but I may not be able to help myself.'

'May not be able to help myself!' Unwittingly in these words he had touched the key-note of the grand *want* of his character:

> 'He was not vile;
> Only a thing to pity most in man—
> Weak.'

Eleanor seemed slightly pained, but still not deeply impressed by his words.

'You do yourself injustice, I think,' she said. 'There may be some truth in what you say, but there is truth in what I say too. There must be. Still, of course, I know, changing circumstances must change people to some extent. For instance, in the present case, you may marry—indeed, I suppose you are sure to do so, sooner or later?'

'I suppose so,' he said, still more gloomily than before.

'And your wife,' she went on, 'may not like me;' he did not contradict her; 'or your life may grow so full of interests and happiness, that—that there may be no place for me in it.'

'*That* is not likely,' he interrupted. 'If I marry, it will not be into such a life as you describe.'

'However that may be,' she continued, 'you see I am right about myself. Change is not likely to come from my side. My life is not likely to grow richer and fuller as time goes on, but rather the reverse.'

Her voice fell a little; in the last few words there was the first tone of misgiving, the first faint shadow of regret, that Maurice had as yet perceived. It startled him. He had wondered awhile back if ever she would wake; but the first signs of restless-

ness, of breaking in her peaceful slumber, reminded him of the nature of the ground on which he was treading. Had he not vowed to himself, by every best feeling of his manhood, that, come what might, *his* touch should never be the one to rouse her real nature, to startle into discord the rich notes that should have sounded in harmony?

'I don't know that,' he said lightly; 'you will have the interest of Georgie growing up. And how lovely she will be! You will have your hands full, I fancy. However, there is no good looking forward, or being gloomy.'

But they seemed to have changed places since a few minutes previously. The gloom appeared to have fallen on Eleanor; she seemed unable to throw it off, or to turn the conversation to general subjects.

'I hope you will tell me when you are going to be married, Mr. Chesney,' she said abruptly and rather irrelevantly.

'But it's quite on the cards I never shall marry,' he replied.

'Is it?' she exclaimed eagerly, her face clearing; 'is it really? O, I am so glad! O no, I don't mean that,' she hurried on; 'I don't mean that I shouldn't be *very* glad for you to marry somebody very nice,

somebody nicer than any one I have ever seen, I think. But, I mean, I am glad you say that just now; for it shows me it can't be true what I have heard.'

'What may that be?' he asked drily.

'That—that you care for Miss Berners;—that is to say, that you are engaged to her, in a sort of a way.'

'I am *not* engaged to Miss Berners in any sort of way, Mrs. Marshall,' he said, very coldly and distinctly; 'and if you care to know my feelings on the matter, I most certainly do not "care for her," as you express it, nor can I imagine myself ever learning to do so. Pray, do not think me rough or cross,' he added in a gentler tone; 'but that girl's name always puts me in a bad temper.'

'But she is very beautiful, and, they say, charming,' said Eleanor. 'Every one seems fascinated by her, except you.'

'And you,' he added, laughing.

'But I do think her beautiful,' she objected.

'And charming?' he persisted. 'Why, then, are you so glad to hear I am not engaged to her?'

'I don't know,' she said slowly. 'Certainly I have had no opportunity of judging as to her being

charming or not. But I don't know why I am glad of what you say.'

'Some day I shall make you try to define your objections,' continued Maurice; 'but here are Georgie and the raspberries.'

'And it would be no use to make me try,' said Eleanor, shaking her head. 'I don't know myself.'

'Such heaps, Nelly!' was Georgie's greeting. 'O, Mr. Chesney, are you there? We want lots more still. Betsey says she can do with any quantity.'

'It is very strange,' said Eleanor meditatively, as she stood on the path drawing on her thick dog-skin garden-gloves, preparatory to a crusade among the raspberries; 'it is very strange, Georgie, where you have learnt to talk as you do. You would hardly believe, Mr. Chesney, that before we came here she had scarcely ever heard English spoken, except, of course, by ourselves, and two or three of the ladies at Le Doux Repos. And now, to hear her, one would suppose she had spent her life among a number of rough English schoolboys.'

'It is very queer,' replied Maurice gravely; 'it can hardly be altogether traceable to natural depravity—eh, Georgie? Confess who has been the

evil communicator in this instance. Is it Charlie Bland?'

'Charlie Bland!' repeated Georgie with profound contempt; 'a little *poucet* of six years old! No, indeed. I can tell you, Mr. Chesney, I have learnt a great many funny words from you yourself; truly I have!'

She danced in front of him defiantly; but it was so impossible to help laughing, that Eleanor could not succeed in scolding her as she deserved for her pertness. They were still laughing very merrily, when an interruption appeared in the person of Esther, with an 'If you please, ma'am, Mrs. Bland is in the drawing-room.'

'O dear!' ejaculated Eleanor.

'Mrs. Bland!' exclaimed Maurice; 'I thought they were all away still.'

'They came back two days ago,' answered Mrs. Marshall. 'I called yesterday to ask how they all were, but I didn't see her. O dear, how tiresome, just when I thought we were going to have such a nice afternoon! But I must go, I suppose; won't you come too, Mr. Chesney? Wouldn't you like to hear for yourself how all the little Blands are after the measles?'

'No, thank you,' said Maurice, laughing; and Eleanor turned slowly in the direction of the house. She had not gone many steps, when a sudden thought struck Mr. Chesney, and he ran after her.

'Mrs. Bland won't be coming out here, Mrs. Marshall, will she?' he asked.

'No,' replied Eleanor, opening her eyes; 'I don't suppose she will; but what if she did?'

'Only—' Maurice hesitated. 'Perhaps—don't think it odd of me to ask it—perhaps it would be as well if you didn't say anything to her about my being here this afternoon. She is a silly little woman, very apt to take offence,' he added hurriedly, seeing the bewildered look in Eleanor's face; 'and you see, by rights, I suppose, I *should* have called to ask after those children of theirs, and—so—if she knew of my being here, she would be sure to think I might have found time to call there.'

It sounded awkward, and he felt it to be so. Mrs. Marshall's brow cleared a little, but she still looked puzzled and surprised.

'They only returned home the day before yesterday,' she said. 'I hardly see that they could be offended at your not having called yet. And, indeed, you may call on your way home if you like. How-

ever, as you wish it, I will not say anything about your being here.' And she turned again and walked on slowly.

Maurice watched her as she went. It seemed to him there had been a slight suspicion of displeasure in her expression as she turned from him; and now he fancied there was a shade more dignity than usual, approaching almost to haughtiness, in her carriage as she paced deliberately up the path leading to the house.

'Have I offended her,' he thought; 'and just when she had been talking so kindly, so very kindly and confidingly to me? What a fool I am! and yet, what can I do? That horrid little idiot to turn up just now! How disgusting everything is!' And, kicking the loose pebbles on the path before him as he went, in no very amiable humour, he returned to Georgie and the raspberries.

'What is the matter, Mr. Chesney?' inquired that acute young lady as soon as she caught sight of his face.

'Nothing,' he replied, more abruptly than usual.

'Well, then, if it is nothing, I would not look so cross about it, if I were you,' persisted the naughty child. 'But I know what "nothing" means:

it means "something," but something I am not to be told.'

'Georgie,' said Maurice gravely, 'when you go on like that, you make me wish you were already at school. I *am* vexed about something, and, as you are quick enough to see it, you might be kind enough not to tease.'

'Are you vexed about something, really vexed?' asked the child in a different tone, coming close to him, and peering up into his face; 'yes, I see you are. Well, then, I'm very sorry, and I'll be good, and I'll tell Nelly she must ask you to stay to dinner, and we'll be very kind to you. But let's go on gathering, Mr. Chesney, and have this big basket filled before Nelly comes back.'

'I can't stay to dinner to-day, thank you, Georgie,' Maurice answered; 'but I can certainly help with the raspberries.'

So saying, he set to work with a will, and they passed the next half hour in undisturbed amity.

CHAPTER IX.

NEWS.

'The rose is fairest when 'tis budding new,
And hope is brightest when it dawns from fears.'
Lady of the Lake.

THE measles left behind and forgotten, Mrs. Bland was quite her old self again—rather too much so, indeed. Eleanor found her considerably inclined to be top-heavy, and disagreeably full of Miss Chesney and gossip concerning the affairs of the Court. She kissed Eleanor as patronisingly as a very little woman can perform that ceremony on a rather tall one, and had hardly patience to answer Mrs. Marshall's kindly inquiries as to the health and well-being of her little people before launching out on her favourite topic.

'Only think, Mrs. Marshall, *they* are coming down the day after to-morrow. Is it not delightful? A whole month sooner than they were expected. I had such a charming letter from dear Miss Chesney yesterday—in such spirits! There are to be such

gay doings at the Court this autumn. Hosts of visitors coming down for the shooting; an archery meeting next month; and I don't know all what! But, of course, under the circumstances, it is only natural.'

'Indeed!' said Mrs. Marshall. She would not ask 'under what circumstances?' but Mrs. Bland was far too eager to communicate her gossip to give heed to the omission.

'Why, don't you know? Haven't you heard? Dear me, how out of the world you do live, to be sure!' said Mrs. Bland pertly. 'Why, to think of your not knowing that Mr. Chesney's engagement to that dear beautiful Miss Berners is announced—*quite* decided on. Of course it has been an understood matter for some time, but known only to the family and intimate friends. *We* knew it ever so long ago—confidentially, of course. I fancy the marriage will not be long delayed.'

'Indeed!' said Mrs. Marshall again.

'I am quite in a fever to see Miss Chesney, and hear all the particulars,' pursued Mrs. Bland. 'I daresay all preliminaries will have been settled already, with them all being in town together.'

'But Mr. Chesney is not in town; he is here just

now, by himself, at the Court,' said Mrs. Marshall at last.

'Here! Mr. Chesney here! I do think you must be mistaken,' objected Mrs. Bland, rather crestfallen. 'Unless, indeed, he has preceded them down by a few days. O yes, of course, that will be how it is! And that reminds me, by the bye—' Though *what* reminded her, Eleanor was at a loss to discover, either then or afterwards. 'You *don't* happen to be driving to Wolding this week, do you, dear Mrs. Marshall? I *should* be so grateful for a lift. Dear Miss Chesney is so anxious about the new damask they are putting up in the blue room—such a sweet room, the one Miss Berners has when she stays there. She is so afraid of the upholsterer not doing it quite as it should be—these country tradespeople are so stupid; but it would have been nonsense to send all the furniture up to town just for new damask—and she wrote to beg me to run over some day this week to Wolding, to see that he understands. And, unfortunately, she must have forgotten to send orders, as usual, about the carriage taking me. So I just thought, if you *were* going—'

'I am not going to Wolding this week; but you are perfectly welcome to the brougham any day you

like after to-morrow, Mrs. Bland,' said Eleanor somewhat stiffly. 'I can always have it by asking Mr. Marshall the day before; and I have no doubt he will be delighted for you to have the use of it. What day will suit you? Shall it be Thursday, the day after to-morrow?'

'O, thank you, yes; that will be charming! Thursday—O yes, Thursday will suit me excellently! At two o'clock—may I ask for it at two o'clock? So very, very kind of you, dear Mrs. Marshall. I am *so* much obliged.' And in the bustle caused by her effusive gratitude, Eleanor somehow managed to get rid of her, evading with consummate skill the repetition of the ceremony she had been obliged to submit to on meeting.

Still more slowly and gravely than she had entered the house, Eleanor took her way back to the raspberry-bushes, where she had left her sister and Maurice. Georgie was not there; she had run in to witness Betsey's satisfaction with the fruits of her industry; Mr. Chesney was lounging idly on the garden-seat nearest to the scene of his late labours; but on hearing Eleanor's step, he jumped up and came forward to meet her.

'I'm so glad your visitor's gone,' he said brightly.

'Why was she in such a hurry to return your call, I wonder?'

'She had two reasons, I believe,' replied Mrs. Marshall quietly. 'One was, to announce to me a rather astonishing piece of intelligence, namely, the engagement—a positive fact, Mr. Chesney; I can vouch for her having it on the best authority—of yourself and Miss Berners: a joyful event, to be followed by all manner of gay doings at the Court. The other was, to ask the loan of our carriage to take her to Wolding, there to execute some commissions for your sister, Miss Chesney, before her return to the Court the day after to-morrow.'

Maurice looked exceedingly startled; Eleanor, watching him closely, could almost have fancied he grew pale.

'Insolent little toad!' he exclaimed at last. 'But, Mrs. Marshall, you didn't surely for one instant believe her?'

'Believe what, Mr. Chesney?' she said coldly. 'I have no reason to disbelieve the news of your family's returning to the Court. I certainly think it rather odd you have not mentioned it to me; not that it is a matter of much consequence to me personally; but in a quiet country place like this, and

among friends meeting so often as we do, it would somehow have seemed only natural for you to have told me any piece of news of the kind. Besides, I do take real interest in that kind Lady Chesney. I trust, as they are coming straight here without going to the sea-side, that she is really better.'

'I hope she is, thank you,' answered Maurice. 'But the news of their return was not the only news Mrs. Bland told you, Mrs. Marshall.'

'Well, as to the other piece of news, I don't know what to think,' she replied bluntly. 'But for your own words this afternoon, I should certainly— The truth is, Mr. Chesney, I don't understand you to-day. I can't express the sort of feeling of mysteries and concealments you have given me. I didn't understand your anxiety that Mrs. Bland should not know you were here. I don't understand *you*. Perhaps, after all, the truth is, I don't understand English ways. If these are a specimen of them, I like them as little as many other things I have come across in England.'

She spoke with a slight petulance; but Maurice could discern that the petulance was superficial, some real distress deeper-seated. He answered her very gravely.

'But, Mrs. Marshall, you don't think I said what was not true about there being no engagement such as you were told of?' he said. 'What possible motive could I have for such paltry deceit—to you, of all people?'

'I don't know,' she still repeated; 'I don't know or understand. Certainly I am very glad it is not true, as I suppose it is not. I should be very sorry, as I told you, if it were true; and it would have hurt me sorely to have found it was at all, *in the least*, true, after what I said to you to-day, and after what you said to me.'

'How do you mean? I don't quite understand,' he said gently.

'I mean, after your leading me on to speak as I did of Miss Berners,' she replied, 'just as honestly and frankly as I would speak to my brother, if I had one. Besides—besides—altogether,' she went on hurriedly, 'Mrs. Bland's talk left a sore, a very sore feeling on my mind. I felt so ashamed, so mortified, to remember all I had said to you to-day—telling you all about myself and my life, and saying those things about our always remaining friends; thanking you for all your kindness and interest in me; and then to have it so coarsely thrust upon me, that you

have quite a separate life and separate interests, into which, it seemed to me, you did not wish me in any way to enter. O, it gave me such a horrible feeling of having made a fool of myself! And afterwards, I daresay, I shall feel just the same for having said all this to you now.'

'No, you will not, you must not!' exclaimed Maurice vehemently, passionately almost. 'I understand it all perfectly. You are far too good; I don't deserve it. I don't deserve a woman like you to care about me or my friendship. But you must try to be sorry for me too. I have been like a bear all day. It was only yesterday I heard of their all coming down like this, and of these hateful parties and things Horatia has set her heart on. I was too disgusted to tell you.'

'But why?' asked Eleanor innocently. 'I really can't see anything so very dreadful in it all. You must often enough have had visitors and parties and things of that kind at the Court. Why are you so disgusted?'

'Why,' he repeated impatiently, 'don't you see what is before me? My "holiday" over, in the first place—these few weeks I have enjoyed more than I ever enjoyed anything in my life. And all the old

thing beginning over again—sneering and discord, and worse than that, I fear. It is very evident they are going to have a hard fight for it. You may despise me for confessing it, Mrs. Marshall, but I can't help it. There are times when I believe they will get the better of me—when I see nothing before me but giving in.'

'Giving in?' said Eleanor bewilderedly; 'giving in to what?'

'To marrying a girl I hate, or rather utterly despise,' he answered doggedly.

Eleanor stared at him in amazement and horror.

'Give in to *that?*' she exclaimed; 'O no, Mr. Chesney, that is impossible! I could never believe *that* possible for you; and you must never believe it for yourself. Till to-day I knew nothing certainly, as to your position towards Miss Berners. I thought there might be some engagement, some understanding, entered into perhaps when you were very young, before you quite knew your own mind; for I somehow did not think—I mean, I could not imagine that you cared for her. Still, I did not know; and though I should have been sorry to hear you *did* care for her, it would not have been nearly, O, not nearly so bad, as to hear you talk deliberately of the possibility of

marrying any woman whom you feel towards as you do towards her.'

'You don't, you can't, understand the sort of pressure that will be brought upon me,' he urged.

'No, I don't, and I never could,' she said coldly; 'I never could understand any man "giving in," as you say. I don't care what the consequences might be to you of resistance. You are a man, and you could work for your living, if the worst came to the worst.'

He smiled half sadly, half bitterly.

'I am no hero, Mrs. Marshall. I'd do a good deal for peace' sake, I fear. Besides, what have I to look forward to? I must marry some day, I suppose; and, after all, it will be a question of other people's choice more than of my own, I expect. It's been the same, more or less, all my life. Everything is a mistake about me from beginning to end—I see that more plainly than ever.'

Eleanor did not answer.

'I've disgusted you, I suppose,' he said. 'Just like me.'

'No,' she said, 'you have not disgusted me, because I will not believe what you say of yourself. I do not, indeed, believe it is yourself that is speaking.

I shall try to forget it, Mr. Chesney. I could not bring myself to think of you as so very, very different from what I have believed you.'

Her words stung him more deeply than she had intended. But he made no reply, and they walked up the path for some distance in silence.

'Must you go already?' asked Eleanor, as Maurice mechanically directed his steps to the gate. 'Will you not stay to dinner? We are dining later than usual to-day. Mr. Marshall is so very busy, he said he could not be home early. I much fear he is over-working himself. He has not looked at all well lately.'

There was a tone of concern, of womanly tenderness, though possibly more daughter-like than wifely in her last words, which struck Maurice, surprised him a little, and for a few minutes diverted his thoughts from the uncomfortable direction in which they had previously been travelling. He turned rather suddenly, and looked at her critically. Her eyes were bent downwards, but the expression of her face told of anxiety and depression.

'I am sorry to hear you say so,' he replied kindly. 'You have anxieties, after all, I see,' he continued, more as if thinking aloud than addressing her; 'I

had always fancied you so free of them! It is a shame of me to trouble you about my troubles. I do not deserve that they should interest you.'

'But they do, they must,' she said, eagerly looking up in his face. 'I told you just now that, once I care for any one, I really *do* care. I mean, I am not capricious and changeable. I cannot help taking a deep interest in any one I have grown to look upon as a friend. That is why it pains me for you to speak as you did just now. I have some troubles, of course, though far fewer than most people. But I don't think I could ever be so self-absorbed as not to feel anxious about your troubles. And if I can be any good to you—that sounds conceited, but I can't say it otherwise—if coming to me, and talking over things as if I were a sister almost, will be any comfort to you, or, still more, if it will perhaps strengthen you *not* to give in, as you call it, in what I am sure, quite sure, is a wrong, a terribly wrong way—if I can be of any good to you in this way, O, Mr. Chesney, nothing would seem a trouble towards this end.'

Her simple words touched Maurice greatly; her womanliness, her single-minded anxiety that he should not let himself fall from her high estimation of him, affected him far more powerfully than any

grand talk about principle, any strong-minded exordium to self-assertion and independence.

'You are very, very good to me,' he repeated; 'that is all I can say. And I wish I could feel more sanguine as to deserving such interest. However, I am grateful, any way. And I'm glad I have not disgusted you so that you are ready to throw me off altogether. I may still come and see you, whenever I can, mayn't I? I shall not be my own master as I have been; but you won't mind my looking in now and then at odd times, when I want to breathe a little fresh air, or,' he added, with a sparkle of his old fun, 'when I feel I should be the better of a scolding.'

'We shall always be glad to see you, Mr. Chesney, at any time you can come,' she answered. 'I am sure you know that is true. I should miss you dreadfully if you left off coming, and when Georgie has gone most of all. And Mr. Marshall likes you to come too. You may always feel sure of a welcome. Won't you stay this evening?'

'No, thank you, I must go back to the Court,' he said reluctantly. 'There are several things I must see to, in preparation for this sudden move. But thank you for saying I may look in at odd times now and then. And pray thank Mr. Marshall for all his

hospitality too. Can't you persuade him to take a holiday?'

Eleanor shook her head. 'I fear not,' she said. But Maurice's kindly mention of her husband pleased her, and her good-bye was quite as cordial, though possibly hardly as cheerful, as usual.

'Poor boy,' she said to herself, ignoring his five years' seniority—'Poor boy, I am very sorry for him. I hope I may be a good friend to him; I do hope I may;' and she walked thoughtfully back to the house.

Things, however, seldom happen in this world quite as we expect. The following morning brought two letters to Chesney, one to the Court, one to The Feathers, both of which considerably altered the frame of mind in which their recipients were looking forward to the next few weeks.

'O, Georgie, my darling, how delightful!' exclaimed Eleanor, when she had mastered the contents of the communication she had received from her husband's sister. Mr. Marshall had already left for his daily work at Easterton.

'What is it, Nelly?' asked the child.

In reply, Eleanor tossed her over the letter which had so delighted her. It was as follows:

'—— Square, Aug. 3.

'My dear Eleanor,—I very much regret to tell you that some months' delay in your sister's becoming a pupil in Miss Bitterfield's establishment appears unavoidable. It seems that Miss B. has received unexpected notice to quit her present residence; and as she will be obliged to take a temporary one while certain additions and alterations are being made to a house she has decided on purchasing, she cannot conveniently receive new boarders before next January, at the close of the Christmas holidays. This delay is the more to be regretted as Miss Georgina has already, contrary to *my* advice, needlessly lost much valuable time. However, the less said on the subject, perhaps, the better. I at first thought of suggesting that your sister should be *temporarily* placed in some other similar establishment; but as my minute inquiries regarding a great number of boarding-schools resulted in Miss Bitterfield's being selected as incomparably the best, it may be the smaller evil to delay the time of commencing her studies, rather than place her in an inferior institution. In this opinion Miss Bitterfield herself coincides. "Let me, if possible, have no work to *undo*, my dear madam. However backward and ignorant I may find the young lady, as the result

of what you tell me of her unfortunately neglected education, I should infinitely prefer to begin at the beginning on my own system," &c. I quote from a letter just received from the excellent lady in question. I trust my brother is well—yourself also. I regret having been unable to spend my usual week with you this summer, but by my doctor's advice I avoided going north, my tendency to bronchitis still showing itself. With kind remembrances, I remain, my dear Eleanor, your affectionate sister-in-law,

'MARIA ELLISON.'

Georgie threw the letter up in the air, rushed at her sister, and hugged her franticly, exclaiming,

'O, it's beautiful, it's lovely, it's *ravissant!* But all the same, Madame *la belle-sœur* is a very impertinent old cat, Nelly. Does she think I can't read, I wonder? I shall pretend I have only just learnt the *abécédaire*, Nelly, when I go to that Miss Bitter something's. Perhaps, if I pretend to be an imbecile, they'll send me home again! But we needn't think about it now at all, for ever so long. Not for—let me see—one, two, three, four, five, six,' she counted gravely on her fingers; 'yes, *six* months. Six whole months, Nelly!' she exclaimed rapturously,

and then the huggings and jumpings all began again.

Eleanor went about all that day with a light step and a sunny face, feeling as if a great weight had been lifted from her heart.

'I wish Maurice would come,' said Georgie that afternoon, when, as usual, they were sitting in the garden. 'I want to tell somebody. Now I've told Betsey and Esther and Susan, I want to tell somebody else. I shall make Maurice guess. I daresay he'll pretend to be vexed.'

She often spoke of him thus unceremoniously in his absence, and but for Eleanor's restriction would have done so readily enough to his face. But to-day she might have said or done what she pleased; Nelly could have found no fault with her.

The wish for Mr. Chesney's presence had scarcely passed Georgie's lips, when he appeared.

'Parlez du—' began the child, but her sister stopped her, laughing.

'I know what you are going to say, and you needn't finish it,' said Eleanor, before she turned to welcome Maurice, all the more heartily because his appearance was unexpected.

'We hardly hoped to see you to-day, Mr. Chesney.

I feared you would be too busy to come,' she began. But Georgie interrupted her with a rapturous account of her 'beautiful, lovely news,' far too impatient to claim his sympathy to resort to her favourite, childish 'guess what I've got to tell.' She was not disappointed: the young man seemed almost as pleased at the news of the reprieve as they were themselves; and so brightly and heartily did he express his pleasure, that Eleanor glanced up in questioning surprise to see what magical change had come over him, whither had dispersed yesterday's clouds of moodiness and recklessness.

'Yes, Mrs. Marshall,' he replied in answer to her unexpressed inquiry; 'you are quite right. I am in a good humour again to-day. I've had some news too.'

'Good, of course,' she said cheerfully; 'one needs be no witch to tell that by your face.'

Mr. Chesney looked a very little ashamed of himself.

'Well,' he said, half apologetically, 'it isn't exactly good—not in itself, that's to say. But it isn't so bad that I need refuse to enjoy its pleasant results to myself. It's only, that my people are not coming down just yet; so I shall be my own master awhile

longer, and all those horrible parties and visitors will be put off, after all, till October. My sister-in-law isn't quite so well again. That is to say, the doctors have taken it into their heads to say so, and to order her to the seaside for some weeks. Not that there is really much the matter with her, poor dear Elizabeth. She sent me a note herself to say I need not feel the least uneasy; so I am not going to feel so.'

'I am glad there seems no cause for it,' said Eleanor; 'but, O, Mr. Chesney, poor Mrs. Bland! There she is at this moment in the upholsterer's shop at Wolding, hastening the putting-up of the new damask in the blue-room at the Court for the expected visitors next week—"that sweet room, you know, that dear Miss Berners always has when she stays there." How *will* Mrs. Bland survive the next six weeks?'

'As best she may,' said Maurice coolly. 'Mrs. Marshall, I did not know before you could be so wicked. But now I am going to make a compact. We are all to be very happy for the next few weeks —few enough they will be, after all; for I must spend a couple of them at the seaside, my sister-in-law wishes it so much—we are all to be very happy, I say; never to quarrel, and to avoid all disagreeable

subjects. By the bye, how is Mr. Marshall? Not that *he* is a disagreeable subject,' he put in laughingly, seeing the inquiry trembling on Miss Georgie's lips; 'but I was thinking of what you said yesterday about his not being very well.'

'He is only fagged—overworked. I hope it is nothing more,' answered Eleanor, though the question brought a slight shadow to her face. 'O Georgie, *how* good you must be, *mon enfant*, to prevent his thinking Miss Bitterfield's change of plan a misfortune! We must entice Mr. Marshall into some more picnics, Mr. Chesney. He enjoyed the last so much, and it did him ever so much good.'

'He should give himself more holidays,' said Maurice.

'He should indeed,' agreed the young wife. 'By the bye, he may *have* to take a holiday soon—a sort of holiday, that is to say. He will probably have to go to Scotland on business before long; and he may be detained there a week or two, he says. But that even would be a change; and I should not mind being alone at all, now Georgie will be still here.'

Her eyes rested lovingly for an instant on the golden head beside her, and then rose, as if in search of sympathy, to the young man watching her with

such unaffected interest. The mute appeal was answered. Then came over Maurice's face what, as a child, poor Lady Chesney had called its 'beautiful look;' and Eleanor thought to herself her friendship was well bestowed.

And the next few weeks passed all too swiftly. Sunny August (it *was* sunny that year), golden September had come and gone before their pleasant presence had been well-nigh realised.

CHAPTER X.

MISS CHESNEY'S DIPLOMACY.

'No, I know Anne's mind for that: never a woman in Windsor knows more of Anne's mind than I do; nor can do more than I do with her, I thank heaven.'

Merry Wives of Windsor.

So it was October before the gay doings so dreaded by Maurice, so joyfully anticipated by Mrs. Bland, began at the Court. Such doings were foreign to the usual habits of the Chesneys, of late years especially; but Horatia, the actual head of affairs in this department, had made up her mind that some amount of divergence from these usual habits was expedient at the present juncture; and, as might have been expected, her decision carried the day. She had several reasons for her belief that this course of action was likely to bring about the event she so ardently desired. She hoped to find that in his secret heart

Maurice had begun to confess to having had enough of his hermit life of the last few months—a change of feeling she would be quick to detect, without requiring him to own it to her, or even arousing his suspicion that she had guessed the truth. She had sense enough, too, to understand that Amethyst Berners was not the sort of girl to attract a man like Maurice if thrown too exclusively into his society, the young lady's 'besetting virtues' being certainly not those of too great domesticity or simplicity of taste. Yet, on the other hand, her step-brother had confided to Elizabeth that the sight of Amethyst, surrounded by a crowd of town admirers, had considerably disgusted him, had gone far to disenchant him of even the superficial impression her personal charms had occasionally made on him.

Country-house intercourse was therefore the only chance left of the young people's becoming better, in the sense of more favourably, acquainted with each other. And at first setting out Horatia hoped great things from this autumn's campaign. With some management—judicious mingling of her other materials in the persons of the visitors whom she intended to serve as background to the drama about to be acted by the two principal characters on her little

stage; occasional unsuspected 'promptings' on her own part—with all this, she looked forward with a fair amount of confidence to ultimate success.

Maurice's manner, however, since their return to Chesney, puzzled her. A change of some kind, she felt instinctively, had come over him. He seemed less boyish; more self-controlled and less impetuous; more amenable, in a sense, to her suggestions and arrangements, but not in a satisfactory sense. His manner of agreeing to, or, at least, not opposing, her proposals, gave her rather the feeling that he considered their subjects not worth discussion, than that he was at last impressed by her superior wisdom and right judgment. Altogether, he succeeded, however unintentionally, in being, as he had always been, exceedingly provoking to her, a very irritating thorn in the flesh to the scheming, ambitious, but not altogether selfish woman, who told herself—and him too, now and then—that all she desired was 'his good,' her only object the strengthening and consolidating the family welfare and position.

'Two things by no means synonymous,' thought Maurice to himself, though he refrained from irritating Horatia by any vain attempt to prove to her this fact. Indeed, he seldom nowadays entered into

any argument or discussion. He was changed, it was quite true; and what was more, he was changing: his character was deepening and consolidating; he thought of many things now in a different way from what he had ever thought of them in before; yet he himself was but dimly conscious of the change. Long ago, years ago, he had looked upon himself as a man—a man of formed character and considerable worldly experience, of matured judgment and opinions. Nowadays, strange to say, he was growing in these respects considerably less self-confident, though at the same time actually far harder and firmer, far less impressionable, far more essentially manly. He was more reserved on many subjects than he had been; the cynical and sceptical opinions he had formerly been rather proud of, he now kept to himself; he indulged much less in his favourite theory of 'being a mistake from the beginning,' and so on; he was less impatient, less irritable, less captious. The discordant elements of his daily life seemed to have lost their power to annoy him; he felt above and beyond them somehow, as if he had a secret something of his own in reserve that strengthened him to bear or ignore them. And yet, poor Maurice, he had never before drawn so near the real

tragedy of life. Never would he have been so deserving of excuse, had he reviled the apparent ill-fortune which before now he had so often accused of mocking his life's best chances with a 'might have been.'

But this he did not himself realise. He was conscious of no change, save that feeling himself growing day by day more determinedly opposed to what he knew his friends were trying to prepare for him, more resolute in his decision never again to waver even to the slight extent he had before done. Yet he was almost equally resolved not to quarrel about it; so he opposed none of Horatia's schemes. He was attentive and cordial to her friends, gentle and forbearing to herself. There was literally no fault to be found with him, save the one grand omission, that neither by word or deed would he in the slightest degree give help or countenance to his step-sister's transparent manœuvring. He treated Miss Berners in precisely the same manner as any and every young lady he met as a guest in his brother's house. Horatia before long began to lose patience. It was far more provoking than if he had defied and opposed her on all occasions in his old way; it was far harder to bear than in the old boyish days, when her sneers

and interference sent him out of the room banging the door after him in a rage.

The parties of guests succeeded each other at the Court through the autumn almost incessantly, their numbers now and then augmented by shorter visits from the various families in the neighbourhood, among whom the Berners were the most frequently to be found. There were few weeks indeed of which two or three days were not spent by Amethyst and her mother at Chesney, accompanied now and then by some of their own visitors from Parkhurst; for it was but seldom that Lady Chesney's health allowed Sir Robert and Horatia to leave the Court. And though Maurice gave in to the extent of mixing, to all appearance sociably enough, in the society at his own home, he stood out firm and inflexible against taking part in gay doings elsewhere; to which eccentricity Horatia, still hoping against hope, thought it safest to give in with a good grace, and to make up for so doing by increasing the amount of gaiety in her own domain.

What Amethyst Berners thought of it all—if, indeed, she gave real thought to anything but the passing amusement of each day as it came—remains to be seen. What Mrs. Bland thought of it, had she

been independent enough to express her true feelings about anything connected with the Chesney family, was, that the reality of all this 'entertaining' at the Court by no means, so far as her personal experience was concerned, came up to the anticipation; for it was but rarely—two or three times in each month perhaps—that the poor little woman and her easy-going husband were invited to take part in the festivities; and this even only to the extent of making two at the dinner-table, when, the number of guests happening to be smaller than usual, Miss Chesney suddenly bethought herself that the Blands would 'come in conveniently,' or 'fill up nicely.' But the rector's wife had served a long apprenticeship to the useful accomplishment of being thankful for small mercies; so she accepted the invitations when they came with becoming alacrity, and ate her dinner, humble-pie included, as if no tantalising rumours of picnics and carpet-dances, to which she was *not* invited, ever reached her ears. There were consolations for her disappointment, certainly: there was considerable alleviation of her mortification to be found in the fact, that if *she* was invited seldom, Mrs. Marshall was invited not at all—a state of things which in her secret heart rather surprised

little Mrs. Bland, though she was far from magnanimous enough to regret it, or in any way to attempt to remove or soften the prejudice which, for some unknown reason, Miss Chesney had evidently conceived against the young mistress of The Feathers.

'Mrs. Marshall cannot be "anybody," after all,' thought the parson's wife, 'or she would receive more attention at the Court. On the whole, perhaps, it is as well for me not to be too intimate with her. I can easily manage not to be so without offending her, poor thing. By the bye, I wonder what Miss Chesney meant the other day when she asked me if the Marshalls were not becoming very gay; she had heard of a good deal of entertaining at their house when "they" were all in London, she said. *I* never heard of their entertaining any one, as I told her; so what could she be thinking of? Surely they never could have asked Mr. Chesney to dinner those few days he was alone here. What presumption, if they did! I should not wonder if it was that. I could see Miss Chesney had something on her mind about them. No: it is much better for me not to be too intimate in that quarter.'

She had little opportunity, however, for exercising her powers of 'management' in carefully with-

drawing from intimacy with the lawyer's wife; for Eleanor showed no disposition to seek her society, and, so far as she could do so without rudeness, discouraged all but the most formal intercourse with her neighbours at the Rectory. She had never cared for Mrs. Bland; and of late, in learning to know her better, she had liked her less than before, and saw no reason for burdening herself with an uncongenial companion. Though quieter, more monotonous than ever, Eleanor did not find her life dull just now. She had Georgie unexpectedly spared to her for these precious additional months; she had her books and her music, and country walks still on bright days; and she had Maurice looking in now and then, as he had asked leave to do, to talk over his troubles with her, to delight her with the often-reiterated assurance, that but for her sympathy and encouragement he really did not know how he should get on at all, or be able to fight his way through the 'dead set' which was being made against his independence and self-respect.

So, though she was never invited to meet all or any of the grand people coming and going at the Court; though, but for the sight of them in church on Sundays and Mr. Chesney's confidences, she would

not have known but what the old house was shut up as of old, Mrs. Marshall managed to feel very cheerful and content, and to be disturbed very little—I would not go so far as to say not at all—by her exclusion from all participation in the gay doings in the neighbourhood. It troubled Maurice far more than it did her, though he respected her quiet dignity far too much ever to allude to the possibility of slight to her being intended, and was grateful to her for always talking, and leading him to talk, as if her isolated life was a thing of her own choice, which indeed, in a sense, was perfectly true. Yet, all the same, though he said nothing, Horatia's conduct in this matter lost her far more ground than she had any idea of in her young step-brother's estimation.

Poor Lady Chesney, who had never forgotten the sweet face of the young stranger, now and then ventured timidly to suggest that 'some attention should be paid to that pretty Mrs. Marshall and her husband.' But Horatia was always prepared with an excuse of some kind. Either 'there was really no possibility of two more at table,' or, 'truly, Elizabeth, there would be no kindness in inviting them to meet such people as the Vere de Veres or the Hautons, with whom they would not have an idea in

common. We must wait till we are quiet again.' So the nominal mistress of the house was snubbed back as usual into her actual place of nobody, being unsupported by Sir Robert, who, the Fursely case having been compromised, had forgotten for the time all about the existence of the lawyer or his wife.

It was not fated, however, that all the gaiety at the Court should come to an end without its affecting the tenants of The Feathers. It came to pass at last that an invitation was sent to the quiet dwellers in the quaint old house—an invitation, too, to one of the 'grandest' of the parties which Miss Chesney had arranged, and at which she had little anticipated the admixture of any foreign element. It was not Lady Chesney's doing, or Maurice's; the latter, indeed, though he naturally resented any neglect of those from whom he had received much genuine kindness and hospitality, was personally—selfishly perhaps—far from sorry that his friends at The Feathers belonged to a distinct world, led a distinct life, from the visitors at the Court; and the manner in which the thing came to pass, the *de haut en bas* tone which accompanied the invitation, made him far more indignant than all the previous neglect.

The prime mover in the affair was certainly the

last whom one would have suspected of any kindly feeling towards the little family at The Feathers, but probably, too, the only person whom Miss Chesney would have allowed to suggest that an invitation should be sent to them. It was no less a person than the beautiful heiress herself; and this was how it happened.

As the weeks and months went on, Amethyst began to get tired of being so much at Chesney.

'It was very stupid there,' she told her mother, 'and people were beginning to make remarks on this great intimacy of theirs with the Chesneys, seeing that nothing had come of it. Not, for her part, that she was at all sure that she wanted anything to come of it. It was all very well to tell her how nice it would be to marry into the oldest family in the county, and what great people she and Maurice would be with all the Chesney property joined to Blendon and Parkhurst; it was all very well too, to talk, as Horatia did, about the gentleman's disinterestedness and modesty and all that; but that sort of thing might be carried too far, and was by no means amusing. Mr. Chesney might be clever and good-looking and the heir to Chesney; but, for all that, he was dreadfully slow, and she was getting very tired of

him and his stiff stupid ways. He never took any more notice of her than if she were nobody at all; she didn't believe he even ever knew what she had on!' Having delivered herself of which piteous complaint, the beauty wound up by declaring she 'hated and detested him; and she would a thousand times rather marry her latest town victim, that handsome Major Hildebrand, whether he was an adventurer or not; or even Lord Alfred Selby, if he was a goose—any way, he had sense enough to waltz beautifully, and to make himself agreeable.'

Mrs. Berners was thunderstruck. Her husband, a busy 'public' man, who thought of his women-kind but as an expensive and unavoidable sort of wax-doll appendage to his household, was the last to whom she could confide her uneasiness at this threatened overthrow of the scheme which for so long Miss Chesney had taught her to regard with such complacency. The poor woman very nearly began to cry; but thinking better of it, ordered her carriage and drove straight back to Chesney, which she had only left the day before, for an hour's confidential 'talking it all over' with Horatia.

Miss Chesney, in her secret heart, felt rather discomfited. It was bad enough to have had one un-

promising puppet to deal with; but if the other too was turning 'camstary' on her hands, truly there appeared little prospect of her long-cherished scheme ever reaching fulfilment. It was too bad of Amethyst —not but what it was all Maurice's fault; really one could hardly blame the girl for taking offence: and some bitter reflections on the old subject of her step-brother's unendurable behaviour rose to Horatia's mind. But she was far too wary to allow her companion to suspect her inward misgivings.

'Amethyst declares she won't come here with us next week,' complained Mrs. Berners. 'What *shall* we do, Miss Chesney? It will make such a talk our not coming, when so many people we know are to be here and expecting to meet us. It will show every one that it is all at an end; and once that is said, we may make up our minds that everything *is* at an end. What can we do? Will you come over and talk to her?'

'She *must* come next week,' said Miss Chesney. 'Don't be afraid, Mrs. Berners; I will manage it somehow. You are quite right; it would never do to let people see any sudden change.'

Mrs. Berners felt much flattered by being told she was 'quite right' by a person of Miss Chesney's

acuteness and sagacity—so much flattered, that the thought which had instantaneously flashed through Horatia's mind never even occurred to her.

'How short-sighted she is!' said Miss Chesney to herself. 'Of course any "talk" on the subject would do *them* no harm; it would only be said that Amethyst had refused Maurice. And that shall *certainly* never be said while I am alive to prevent it.'

'But what will you do, my dear Horatia?' persisted Mrs. Berners. 'I assure you dear Amy is very determined, once she takes a thing in her head.'

'And so am *I*, my dear Mrs. Berners,' replied Horatia with a little laugh. 'And I have taken it most decidedly into my head that you must all come next week. There are several people coming whom I know Amethyst would like to meet. Don't be afraid; I will manage to make her come. I shall drive over to-morrow to luncheon, and you will see how quickly I shall bring her round. Of course you will not tell her of your having said anything to me about it; but when I am over to-morrow just leave me alone with her for half an hour or so.'

Mrs. Berners promised, and departed considerably relieved in her own mind, and more than ever impressed with Miss Chesney's cleverness — more

than ever, also, anxious that the projected alliance should come to pass.

Horatia had not reckoned without her host. She knew pretty well the nature with which she had to deal, and succeeded as might have been expected. When she left Parkhurst the next day, she left Amethyst in a fever of excitement at the prospect of the entertainment in store for her at Chesney the following week.

'Dear Amethyst is so good-natured,' said Miss Chesney to Mrs. Berners as she bade her farewell, the young lady standing by. 'I came over here to-day quite in despair at the prospect of the quantity of people—several young ladies too—we shall have on our hands to entertain next week. Now the weather is so broken, it is really very hard work amusing them; but Amethyst has suggested such a charming plan, which will keep them amused not only in the evening, but all day long too, making preparations. I can't tell you, dear,' turning to Miss Berners, 'how much obliged I am to you for the idea. You must come over a day or two before the others arrive to help to arrange the subjects. We must get Maurice to help us too. He has such good taste; he will be just the person we want.'

Mrs. Berners looked mystified, but Amethyst hastened to explain.

'We are going to have *tableaux vivants* at Chesney next week, mamma,' she exclaimed. 'Won't it be charming? and something quite new too—at least one seldom hears of them nowadays. I was reading about some the other day in some book—I forget what it was—and the description of them did so take my fancy. They are much nicer than private theatricals; not half so much trouble. I hate learning things by heart. You must order the frame at once, please, Miss Chesney, won't you? and we must drive to Wolding to-morrow, mamma. I must get ever so many things I shall want for my dresses. Do send me a list of subjects as soon as ever you can, Miss Chesney; and then I can choose mine, and have some idea what I must wear.'

'I will consult Maurice immediately I get home, and send you a list of any he thinks of; and, remember, we *count* on you for the principal figure, Amethyst, and you must come over at least two days before,' said Miss Chesney. 'We shall *call* them impromptu, of course; but, still, the more we can arrange beforehand the better.

So she drove off in triumph, having fully achieved

the purpose of her visit. She had nothing to do now but gain over Maurice to promise his assistance. She had not much fear of his refusing; he had been so very amiable of late, so evidently anxious to keep on good terms.

'Well,' reflected his sister with a curious smile, 'we shall see. I will give him another chance. It will be time enough to have my quarrel out with him if he is so infatuated as reject it.'

As she entered the village, she descried Maurice's figure some little distance in front of her. He was crossing the road, intending evidently to walk home by the church path. Horatia whipped up her ponies. She reached the hall-door just as Maurice sauntered up through the garden.

'Where have you been, Maurice?' she said suspiciously, as he came forward to help her to alight.

'A walk,' he answered carelessly; but meeting the expression on her face, which in her irritation she did not disguise, his manner changed. 'Why do you look at me so, Horatia?' he said defiantly. 'If you wish to know the precise extent and object of my walk, you are perfectly welcome to hear them. I have been to call at The Feathers.'

'Indeed!' replied Miss Chesney, with her bitter-

est sneer, 'I must congratulate you on the good taste you display in the choice of your friends.'

Maurice made no reply, but he *looked* at his step-sister as she swept past him into the house with something in his eyes that she had not seen in them for long — a mingled light and darkness that reminded her of some of their worst encounters in his boyhood.

'If it is *that* influence!' she said to herself, as she went slowly up the stairs. She looked as if she would like to clench her fist at some invisible foe, and the expression in her face was not pleasant to see.

Nevertheless a tacit truce appeared again to succeed this ill-timed outburst. Maurice and his sister were perfectly civil to each other when they met again; and when she asked for his assistance and coöperation in the matter of the projected *tableaux vivants*, he promised both readily enough, and even seemed to enter into the discussion with cordiality and interest. Horatia could not make him out.

END OF VOL. II.

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